

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: EVELYN SMITH  
INTERVIEWER: ROBERT FOSTER  
(with Holly Metz)  
DATE: 22 AUGUST 2006

SIDE ONE

RF: We're sitting with Evelyn, continuing our interview from a few weeks back. Listening to the tape and going through some of the transcript, we realized we probably needed more information about you. We had a lot of information on your parents, and there was a lot to say, but we wanted to update it with some of your work history, some of the things you've been interested in, in Hoboken's life, which might have to do with the church, or the NAACP. We said we were going to stay away from politics and that's fine, because there's a lot of other stuff, too. So anything you want to add about your Hoboken time?

ES: Oh, my gosh. That's so open.

RF: Well, I can be specific, too.

ES: If you're specific, it makes it easier for me.

RF: Okay. Do you want to talk about some of the jobs you've had in Hoboken?

ES: Sure. Yes, I guess we can do that. I need a copy of my résumé to give you years. I'm trying to think. My first job -- the first job I ever had was in Hoboken, working part-time at the offices of the Hoboken Housing Authority, and I did secretarial work. I remember one of the employees in the office very well, who seemed to wield a lot of power, named Mrs. Abom.

RF: What year, roughly, was that?

ES: Well, it was when I was in high school, okay? So that had to be maybe -- going back a few graduations -- I think I graduated in '67, so it was maybe '64, '65, or something like that.

RF: And was that considered a good job?

ES: Oh, it was fun. It was a part-time job, only a few hours a day. But my first work experience was in Hoboken, in the offices of the Housing Authority. Then, I guess, after that -- after that, what did I do? After that I went away to college, and I went to Douglass College, down in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I graduated with a double degree, in philosophy and African-American studies. What was I going to do with that? I was determined, when I graduated from college, that I wasn't going to school anymore, even though all my life I thought I wanted to be a doctor. Then when I realized how much further education it took, and after I finished my first four years as an undergraduate, I said, "I don't want to go to school anymore."

So after I graduated I worked, for the summer, at the Unemployment Office in Hoboken, which was located on River Street at that time. After working there for a summer, I beat down the doors to Montclair State College to let me in, to get a graduate degree.

RF: You were back.

ES: Yes. I said, "Please, let me! I want to go back to school! I'll never say never again!" So I went to Montclair State, and I got a graduate degree. While I was at Montclair State I got involved in an intern program, and worked as an intern in the Reading Department at Essex County College in Newark, New Jersey. I stayed at Essex County College probably until the mid-'80s, and graduated from Montclair State, and also from the intern program, to being an instructor of reading and English at Essex County Community College.

Okay. And at the time I was teaching at Essex County, I was also -- like I said, I was working on my master's degree. I acquired my master's degree, I hung it up in my bathroom, next to my undergraduate degree, and once I stopped teaching at Essex County College, I went to school for computers. While I was doing that, I signed up with a temp agency, and wound up getting a one-day assignment at United States Testing Company, which turned into a number of years.

It was very interesting, working at the United States Testing Company, because even though it was a very large corporation, their techniques and procedures relative to the storing and transference of data, from lab sheets to paper, and the type of equipment they used



to do it, were very antiquated. And being that I had just come fresh out of computer school, I was ready to dive in and update procedures -- Dave Hansen, who was the president of the division I worked with -- which was the Environmental Sciences Division -- he gave me a lot of latitude. When I started there we had one dedicated word processor; when I ended there, we must have had at least four to six computers in the laboratory, where they would now take data from the field and enter it directly into the system, rather than write it on a piece of paper, print it out, and then give a report to the secretary to type up. Dave even wound up with a computer in his office, too. The president and the vice-president of the divisions also wound up becoming computer literate.

Let's see. When I left the United States Testing Company --

RF: In the testing -- do you remember any unusual things, from the types of things they did there?

ES: Well, you know, they started out doing stack testing, but that was before I got there. But the Environmental Sciences Division evolved into a very profitable division that did asbestos removal

supervision, which was very interesting. I didn't know anything about asbestos removal when I started, but I knew a great deal about it when I left. In fact, I even took a sample at a friend's home, in the basement of a friend's home, to see if there were asbestos fibers in the air.

RF: Again, this is the '70s, did you say?  
Or what year?

ES: No, his had to be late '80s or early '90s.

RF: Okay. So all the environmental laws were definitely in place, and they were complying with that.

ES: Exactly. United States Testing Company had some very big and impressive clients -- large corporations, banks. Most of the time the workers were in New York City, and over the time period that I was there it evolved, I guess, from a department of maybe less than five people to close to a dozen or more. It was a very interesting and exciting time.

Then once I left the United States Testing Company -- let me think. I began working for a small company -- let me not get ahead of myself. I'm not sure about the chronology here, but I did work for Xavier Company, which was located in Hoboken. [When I began at Xavier, we were in the Neumann Leathers building.] That was in the beginning, before it had become what it is now. It was when you had to operate a freight elevator, and bring it back down to the first floor. The building was very, very raw and empty. It was a "trip" back then. But the company I was working for then did ads. They produced commercial ads for the *Thomas Register*. Are you familiar with the *Thomas Register*? The *Thomas Register* is like an industrial encyclopedia, just full of ads -- fifteen or twenty volumes. Whenever industry needs something, this is the source they would go to. The young man I worked for -- oh gosh -- I'm trying to think of Ken's last name. But his middle name was Xavier, and that's where the name of the company came from.

Anyway, we produced ads, and I learned a great deal about the graphics part of computers in my experience there. I was the "office manager," in the capacity that I was there, just as at United States Testing I was the office manager, as well. I always

seemed to find some interest in whatever field I was working in at the time.

Then, I believe, after I left Xavier -- which was caused by Ken -- Ken Probst -- moving to California. He was an avid surfer and the Jersey Shore just wasn't doing it for him, so he moved to California. After that I began working for a small company in Jersey City, Thomas English & Associates, and they dealt with the sale of waste water management equipment. Again, it was a small office. I kind of liked working in small offices, after the big university. I must have worked there for four or five years. The company grew, but then the company had to downsize, and I was let go. During that time my mother was showing signs that were more than senile dementia; she was getting into Alzheimer's. As a matter of fact, she was in a senior daycare while I was working. So once I stopped working for Thomas English & Associates, I started working part-time, again back in Hoboken, for an accounting firm.

RF: Most of these jobs -- were they through personal connections -- you knew someone -- or were you answering an ad?

ES: I'm trying to think. At United States Testing -- I wound up there as a result of a temporary agency. When I left United States Testing, I think Xavier was a matter of answering an ad. Let me see. I believe from one of the people that I hired at Xavier, I got a lead for the job at Thomas English & Associates. Finally, at the Hoboken Accounting Group, which was the last job I was mentioning -- that again was just a matter of answering an ad. That job was part-time, because I really wanted to spend more time supervising my mom. Eventually, I left that job, in '98, when I stopped working altogether, to take care of my mother, who needed full-time care.

RF: So she was able to stay at home, because you were giving the care?

ES: Yes. At one point she had to go into a nursing home for a short time, because she was debilitated after a long hospital stay. She had to go in for therapy, and once they were able to build her back up -- I wasn't too thrilled with the nursing home. I spent more time at the nursing home than I spent at home, to make sure my mother received the proper attention. As a

result of that, I decided it was time for me to quit my job, and make sure my mother was taken care of properly. That's what I did, until she died.

RF: Speaking of taking-care-of -- we know you have a real love of animals and animal rescue, can I say? Tell us about your involvement with animals.

ES: Okay. Well, we got a little into that before, because in the past, when I was young, "like I was the depository" -- but after a certain point in my life I said, "Okay. That's it. No more animals." Because I belonged to a couple of animal welfare groups, and they would ask me to hold an animal. The whole idea was that eventually you were going to get that animal adopted out -- this was just a foster home -- and more often than not my foster home became a permanent home. So I decided to take in no more foster animals, we were just going to stay with the number we had, and that's it. But over the years I've taken in a lot of animals. All the dogs I have right now -- one of them is from Animals Need You, who came to me as a puppy. She was supposed to be there for a short time, and I've had her for five or six years. Another one is a dog that a friend of mine acquired from

someone who was going to take the dog to the pound. But the dog was too cute, so I kept the dog. Another dog I have is one that was delivered to my door by the Jersey City Animal Control, as a result of my agreeing to take the dog in, because the president of Animals Need You, [the late] Nancy Van Ossanen, asked me to take care of it, because she knew that of her members, I was one of the ones who was better with larger dogs. The last dog I have, Chowie, he's one who was rescued from the Hudson River by the New York Harbor Police, and, I believe, the Hoboken Fire Department. So right now I only have four. There were times when I had as many as seven. They're all rescues.

RF: So what happens to a dog now -- because Hoboken doesn't have an animal shelter. What happens if someone calls in and says there's a runaway dog in the neighborhood? Do you know the process that happens?

ES: Well, they should call the police department, which will then probably refer them to the Assisi Center, formerly the Jersey City SPCA -- because I think now, after a long time of not having a contract

with them, that Hoboken does have a contract with them to pick up strays [Ms. Smith later added: Hoboken currently has a contract with the Newark Humane Society. During regular business hours residents can call the Hoboken Health Department at 201-420-2364 for animal concerns. Otherwise, they can contact the Hoboken Police Department at 201-420-2100.]

Within the last two years, I've had new neighbors on my block come to me about, "Oh, Evelyn, there's this beautiful dog tied up in front of Shop Rite, and I know this dog must belong to somebody," etc., etc. So I would make a few calls, to find someplace to place the dog, until we can find out what's being done. Because most people don't want the dogs to go to the Assisi Center. I can't say why, but they don't. So we look for other options, other alternatives.

Then, over the years, too -- I can remember that one year when we had two or three big snowstorms, one right after the other -- I can't think of the breed, but it's some kind of a bull terrier, the type that Spuds McKenzie is? I forget what the name of that terrier is. He came running down the street, in all the snow. He was by himself, just running down the street, so I grabbed him, pulled him in, and called the SPCA to see



if anyone had reported him lost. Nobody had. I called the police department. Nobody had. So I kept him for a few days, then I figured I'd call back again. Finally, one day while I was walking him, someone recognized him, and they took the dog home. I had another situation during the summer, a number of years ago -- I think this was before I ever had any pit bulls -- this mother pit bull and, I think, two puppies were running up and down my block. There were a lot of people on the street, so I assumed they belonged to someone. But then everybody went in their houses, everybody went home, and the dogs were still there. So I took them in -- and that terrified my mother, because she had heard about *pit bulls, pit bulls!* So I took them in, got the information off their tags, and called the vet the next day. They belonged to a man named Woodie, who ran a bar on Newark Avenue -- Newark Avenue between Jefferson and Monroe.

RF: Woodie's Lounge?

ES: Yes. They belonged to Woodie. I called him and he came, and picked up his doggies. Two weeks later they were back at my house again. They broke

loose and came back. At least this time I knew where to take them.

But now that Hoboken has become such a built-up city, with such affluent people, I notice that, in my neighborhood -- and I'm thankful that in my neighborhood -- there isn't that stray problem, problem of stray dogs and stray cats -- in my neighborhood. I understand it still occurs in other parts of the city, but thank God I don't see it. Of course, for anybody reading or listening to this, I am not taking in any more animals! I don't want people to hear this and think, "Oh, if I've got an animal problem, contact Evelyn." Evelyn is *retired*.

RF: I can't remember. Did we talk about changes on your block? Because you've lived on that block your whole life --

ES: Yes, practically.

RF: -- and there have been good changes, but probably not so good changes. Do you want to just make some observations?

ES: Well, as you said, I've lived on the block most of my life. I've lived on the block since 1953, and in 1953 there were a number of tenement houses on the block, and there was a diverse mixture of families -- German, Italian, Irish, Black, Hispanic. We were all there, all mixed up together, everybody playing with everybody's kids, and everybody's mother reprimanding everybody else's child. It was just like one big family. But then, when urban renewal came in, and tore down a lot of tenements, that displaced a lot of people, and a lot of the people went into public housing. I know some of those families are still in public housing today. Then there was a long period where those lots with houses that were demo-ed by urban renewal lay vacant.

Needless to say, back then there was no problem parking. But then Hoboken got into its first phase of development, and during that phase there were at least three or four different projects that went up on the block. It really didn't change the neighborhood that much, but when the second phase started, when they really started developing, things got a little funky, I guess you would say, because we started getting to the point where the block was really overcrowded. You couldn't find a place to park. You had a lot of young people coming in

who did just that; they came in and they went out. They left to go to work, and they came home. They left to go to a club or whatever, and they came home. There was really very little interaction between the old-time residents of the block and the new residents. But that's changing a little bit now. Over the past five or six years I can see a change in that.

RF: Are there other families who have been on the block as long as you have?

ES: No. No, I guess I'm the last holdout from the '50s. But there are some people who have been there since, I guess, maybe, the '70s -- like, you know, Jennifer. I consider her an old-time resident.

RF: She'd like that.

ES: And Ann O'Brien. Ann's an old-time resident. I'm trying to think. Are there any others?

RF: That's mainly a residential block. Were there any businesses on the block?

ES: Oh, yes. When I was a child there was a coat factory on the corner of Madison and First. There was a meat house, I guess you would call it. They didn't slaughter the cows, but they had the whole carcasses and they cut them up. There was one of them on the corner of First and Madison. Then a few doors in from that was the plumber's shop, and the family resided in the back of the plumber's shop. Their name was Freinch. I couldn't remember how to spell it, but it was an elderly German couple, and the wife -- I used to go by there when I was an adolescent, and she taught me how to knit. After she taught me how to knit she taught me how to crochet, and after crocheting she was getting ready to teach me how to weave. But we didn't get that far.

I'm trying to think. Of course, in the middle of the block, across the street from me, in the house that Ann O'Brien now lives in, was Francone's candy store. And right next to the candy store was Francone's Bakery. They really didn't sell to the public, but they sold to various stores and restaurants. Down at the other end of the block there was also another meat-packing house. That was on the corner of Madison and Observer Highway. On the other corner of Madison and Observer Highway there was a bar. So we had a lot going on.

RF: I forget where your house is, but right across from Jennifer's house there's like a garage? There's the residence above, and then the garage. Was that a car mechanic?

ES: No, that was the Basilicato residence, and it housed three generations of one family, the Basilicatos, the LeCounts - Wait. Let me think. Mr. and Mrs. Basilicato, and then their daughter, Ann, who married LeCount, then her children -- Amy and Jimmy. Amy and I were very good friends. We used to sleep over at one another's house. She was a redheaded girl with all these freckles. Her brother was also a redhead.

[Evelyn Smith later adds the following recollections about the Basilicatos: There were three generations of this family living in this three-family house. Mr. and Mrs. Basilicato's single (unmarried) son, Sam, also lived there.

Mrs. Basilicato's and Mrs. LeCount's authentic Italian cooking was to die for. When I was in my twenties, I can remember mentioning to Mrs. LeCount how much I loved her eggplant *parmigiana*. Well, a few days

after that, she came to my house with all the ingredients and taught me how to make the dish.

Although Jimmy and Amy moved out of Hoboken, I remained close with their parents until their deaths.

By the time I reached my forties, Mr. LeCount was the only family member living on the block and I would shovel the snow from his steps and sidewalk—because although he was capable of doing it, I knew it was less stressful for a woman of my age than a man of his advanced years to perform such a task.]

RF: So they simply used the garage to park vehicles?

ES: Yes.

RF: Because it went far back, I think.

ES: Yes. It would go all the way back. Like that edifice you see there is just a door. It opens up, and you go down a long driveway area to the back, where the garage was. But Mr. Basilicato used to make wine in the basement.

RF: And what was their ethnic background?

ES: Italian.

RF: Then you mentioned Francone. He was involved in politics -- same family?

ES: Yes.

RF: So did he run the bakery, or was it the generation before him?

ES: No, I think it was his same generation, but his brother. Louie Francone and his wife did live further down on the block. His family lived all over that block, because it was his family that owned the store. I don't know if it was his mother or his grandmother. Then some of his family lived directly across the street from me, and some of his family lived in the house directly to the right of my house.

RF: And are there any Francones still in the neighborhood there?



ES: No. I only know of one, who lives in South Jersey now.

RF: Okay. I'm just wondering -- organizations you've been involved with. You've been a member of the NAACP in Hoboken.

ES: Yes, yes.

RF: Very actively involved?

ES: You know, when I was a kid I was a member of the NAACP, because they had a youth branch of the NAACP, and I don't really remember too much about it. Like I said before, I can remember dying socks for the cheerleaders that went along with the uniforms. They had the basketball team, and I remember that we had fundraising contests. My father, in his position at Emerson, was able to help raise a lot of money, so I could be Miss NAACP one year. I probably wouldn't remember that, if it wasn't documented. But before that I was a Brownie. That's when the Girl Scout headquarters was on Garden Street, before they turned it into an automated garage. I was a member of the Mt. Olive Baptist

Church Young People's Choir. At some point in time I went from being a member to being pianist for the Young People's Choir, which my mother directed. As I got older I joined the Senior Choir, so both my mother and I were in the Senior Choir at the same time.

I don't know. I'm trying to think of any other organizations and affiliations. I can't think of any others.

RF: That's plenty.

I'm just curious -- staying away from politics, specifically -- what are some of the big issues you think Hoboken is facing now, in the last couple of years. If you don't want to go there, it's okay.

ES: No, really, because that's not supposed to be the focus of this -- right?

RF: I guess that's true.

ES: Because we're supposed to be dealing with --

RF: But you just have so much wisdom, living on one block for most of your life. I don't think there are that many people who can say that. You've seen a lot of the changes. I guess I was interested in people who are born and raised here, and then --

HM: Raised but not born.

RF: That's true. But people -- just thoughts concerning the new residents and the old-time residents. If you had any thoughts about that --

ES: Well, as I said, you know, back in "the day" there seemed to be no separation. It seems nowadays, at least on my block, we're kind of melding together a little more. But that may be because, on my block, there are so few of the old-time residents. There are so few. I know there are many sections in Hoboken where it's just new residents, because of all the new construction -- blocks and blocks of new construction.

RF: So how are people coming together? Is it just from parking -- moving their car when it's street-cleaning day -- or is there a block party, or -- ?

ES: Well, you know, to tell you the truth, I think it's mostly, in my situation, people with animals.

RF: Dog-walking.

ES: Yes. You see them walking their dogs. That's how I've come to know a number of my neighbors -- because I have animals, they have animals. My animals are very much present most of the time, because of my having a backyard right next to my house, so they're out in the yard a lot, and get a chance to bark at people who walk by. Then I see my neighbors walking their dogs. Who can't go up and pet a cute dog, once you have the permission of the owner -- because not all dogs are friendly. I think it's because of the animals.

-end-