

## Oral History Interview

Albina D'Alessio

WH059

(written transcript and digital audio)

On July 31, 2009, Albina D'Alessio was interviewed at the Woodbridge Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 10:30 A.M.

### ***1. Identify individual-name, section, date of birth.***

*Albina D'Alessio:* My name is Albina D'Alessio. I presently live in Fords however I was born on Amboy Avenue right here in Woodbridge Proper and at age one and a half we moved to Port Reading. I lived in Port Reading most of my adult life until 1966. I was born in 1935 and I had a great time growing up in Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that's what we're eventually going to get down to, what life was like in Port Reading.

### ***2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?***

*Albina D'Alessio:* Basically all my life, Woodbridge Township you might say.

### ***3. Why did you or your family originally move to Woodbridge?***

*Albina D'Alessio:* You know, my parents came from Italy and they settled in Port Reading because so many of the residents of Port Reading came from the same small town in Italy called Pietrastornina. A lot of people have a great time trying to say that so that's why they settled in Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* When your family moved to Port Reading where exactly did they live?

*Albina D'Alessio:* The very, very first house we lived in was on Second Street; my dad then had a grocery store and bakery. Then the exact date of when we moved to Fourth Street I'm not sure. It was in '48 or '49, something like that. My dad put up a building where he sold the bakery part and we had just the grocery store. My dad had built a large building and it had our living quarters; we had two small apartments that we rented.

*Brenda Velasco:* He was a good businessman.

*Albina D'Alessio:* He was, he never gave up no matter what happened. So I lived between Second Street and Fourth Street all of my life.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then you lived by the Coppola's.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I lived right across the street from the Coppola's.

### ***4. What physical changes have occurred over the years in the area you lived?-houses, streets, services, stores, houses of worship, schools, etc.***

*Brenda Velasco:* Let's look at the housing situation when you were growing up.

*Albina D'Alessio:* In what way do you mean the housing situation?

*Brenda Velasco:* Were there as many houses there? Because you were born in 1935 and this was pre-World War II.

*Albina D'Alessio:* When we were there, there were very few homes. Port Reading was divided into sections, believe it or not, and I think you know about that. There was one section called Hagaman Heights, there was downtown, there was uptown and there were the Avenues. Most of the homes were individual homes built by many of the immigrants who had come to Port Reading. There were no developments, as we know them today. In fact, I remember when the first development came into Port Reading, which is in the area of Port Reading School No. 9. We were devastated that this development was coming in because that's where we used to play and we used to go pick blackberries; it was our summer fun area. So most of the homes were individual homes; maybe two family homes were the most that you saw at that time. Today, as I drive through Port Reading, I think I use the term used to be, because so many things have changed and some for the better. Many of the homes are well kept today. I mean there are very nice developments, well kept. But for me personally, as I say when I go to Second Street where my house used to be and now it's the Port Reading Post Office, which is fine. Our family house used to be on Fourth Street. It's now a cul de sac. School No. 9 on West Avenue is now an empty lot. The small St. Anthony's Church that I attended is now a little parking lot however we're very happy to have the new St. Anthony's Church. So there's been an improvement. I think when you drive through Port Reading, it looks better than when I grew up I have to admit. The homes are well kept. But for me there's been a lot of change and some for the good and some a little sad.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were the streets paved when you were growing up?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, all the streets were paved.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, because certain streets of the township did not have (paving).

*Albina D'Alessio:* Oh, they were because we roller skated on all those streets.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, they had paved streets back there.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you mentioned a post office, did you have postal service?

*Albina D'Alessio:* No, the very first post office that I remember was actually on Turner Street. It was the lower level of a two family house. It was Mr. DaPrile, I think, was the post master then. We had to go pick up our mail and I can still remember my mailbox number, it was 218.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*Albina D'Alessio:* And you had to go pick up your mail and then there was a piece of property available on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and Turner Street. My dad had some money invested and put up a building and the post office was then moved there because at that point they needed more space. I think at that point, if I remember correctly, there was some mail delivery from that. Then I couldn't tell you when that building was torn down. The new post office is now on Port Reading Avenue and Second Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, we're going between Question 4 and Question 5 here which is fine. How about the stores because you mentioned your dad had a store?

*Albina D'Alessio:* There were two grocery stores, I'm talking about the downtown section because that's what I'm more familiar with. There was the **Ragucci Store** and my dad's store, **D'Alessio**, and there was Mr. Micharelli, I think was his name. He had a candy store and you could go in there and maybe buy shoelaces, a little general store, but very, very small. There were taverns, of course, you couldn't be without the taverns. There was **Bunzee's** and my uncle had a tavern, **Russo**, that was on Port Reading Avenue. There was another one on Tappen Street and there was one, I think, up in Hagaman Heights. So there were quite a few little taverns in the town.

*Brenda Velasco:* I think Vinnie Martino mentioned that somebody in his family had a.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* That's right, there was one uptown also on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and, I think, Lee Street. That's right. (Center Bar)

*Brenda Velasco:* So you didn't have any big stores in Port Reading?

*Albina D'Alessio:* No, not the very large stores. We used to go to Carteret. We would go to Carteret and there were **Jake Brown's**, a general store and there was a hardware store. There were quite a few stores in Carteret and many times we would walk from Port Reading to Carteret. Perth Amboy was the bigger shopping. Friday night everybody got the #62 Bus and we went to Perth Amboy and shopped.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about houses of worship?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Of course the main one was St. Anthony's. St. Anthony's was the focus of a lot of things that happened in Port Reading. Actually, Father Milos was the one priest that I remember the most and he was very instrumental, very influential in what we did as kids. He was responsible for bringing in the first little library on West Avenue. He introduced us to music. He introduced me particularly I still have my fife from the Fife and Drum Corp. The first television I ever saw was at the rectory. He invited a group of us one day and there was this little black and white television.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did they have the magnifying glass?

*Albina D'Alessio:* No, he didn't have the magnifying glass. It was just a small set and it was a news program. He had a dog. I forgot the dog's name. He spoke to the dog in Polish all the time so some time we would try to remember some of the Polish words but we weren't as successful. One thing I remember about Father Milos was when my dad had the bakery. At three o'clock the second oven would open where all the bread would come out and people would come in around three or three thirty to buy fresh warm bread and there would be a line of people outside. Father Milos would stand there and make sure nobody cut in line, so you're third, you're fourth, you're fifth, you know, and he would do that every day.

*Brenda Velasco:* He was a traffic cop.

*Albina D'Alessio:* He was, he was a little bit of everything. Also in the summertime he encouraged seminarians to come to Port Reading and they were

wonderful because they had summer school and we would go on picnics. They would train the little boys at that time to be altar boys. In fact, one of them is Armando Perini who then became.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Father Perini.

*Albina D'Alessio:* From St. Helena's Church in Edison. Father Perini would like the way my mother cooked so he would come and eat at our house real quick and then go back to the rectory and eat again. We saw Father Perini not too long ago and we kind of reminisced about some of the things from Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* But he was not at Port Reading.

*Albina D'Alessio:* He was not, no. He just came in for the summer. He was just there for the summer.

*Brenda Velasco:* Small world.

*Albina D'Alessio:* It is. You know you have to be very careful.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were there any other churches?

*Albina D'Alessio:* You know what, I don't think so. I think the other closest church was the Presbyterian Church, what we called the White Church, and Carteret had churches.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that would reflect the demographics with the heavy concentration of Italian immigrants.

*Albina D'Alessio:* In fact, the people from Pietrastornina actually started St. Anthony's Church and we just celebrated our 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2006. People came from the town to celebrate with us. The mayor came. There were ten of them, ten from the town came.

*Brenda Velasco:* But it was originally the residents who had immigrated that started St. Anthony's.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that was in 1898?

*Albina D'Alessio:* '06.

*Brenda Velasco:* 1806.

*Albina D'Alessio:* 2006 was our 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so it was 1886.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Right, and then last summer we went as a group from St. Anthony's to the little town. We presented a plaque to the church to thank them for starting St. Anthony's. It was an unbelievable experience there. Just exciting, I still think about it.

*Brenda Velasco:* I'm sure. Do you have any relatives still there?

*Albina D'Alessio:* About eighty-eight I think are still there.

*Brenda Velasco:* And this small Italian village is located outside of Naples?

*Albina D'Alessio:* It's east of Naples, about an hour's drive outside of Naples.

*Brenda Velasco:* Is it over the mountains?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well, yes, kind of, it is because it's the province of Avellino. I don't know if you're familiar with that area. It's exactly one hour outside of Naples. Two hours outside of Rome. I still have my mother's sister who lives in the little town but, you know, my cousins have gone to school and they live in the vicinity. Some live in northern Italy. In fact, I'm picking up cousins this

weekend who are coming to spend some time with me. So we still keep in touch.

*Brenda Velasco:* Terrific!

*Albina D'Alessio:* Once a week I call my aunt. God forbid I don't call her, I'm in trouble. She's a riot.

*Brenda Velasco:* Therefore you're fluent in both languages?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well, I speak the dialect, which is the typical dialect of the town because that's what I grew up with in Port Reading. Last summer when we went to Italy from St. Anthony's I didn't realize that the mayor was going to grab me from out of the crowd and say, come over here you're going to translate. So I did all the translating. I explained to them I speak the dialect, this is what I know but I was very well received. They appreciated the fact that I did know the dialect of the town.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, I'm sure.

**5. *What public buildings/property were there?-post office, library, parks, firehouses, schools etc.***

*Brenda Velasco:* Let's go into schools for Port Reading, because we know you were an educator in Woodbridge Township. But I really want to concentrate on Port Reading as you were growing up.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Sure, of course.

*Brenda Velasco:* With the schools, what schools did you attend?

*Albina D'Alessio:* The only school that we had at that time was School No. 9 and it was on West Avenue. The principal was Martin Braun, we used to call him Mr. Brown but it was Martin Braun. He was from Perth Amboy. It was a K- 8 school. We had to really behave because the teachers were always right, always. And there were a couple of teachers, as kids, we really feared. It was the fourth grade teacher and the seventh grade teacher and they were tough teachers but very good teachers, they really were. There was also another little school, I just thought of it, up in Hagaman Heights. It was a two room schoolhouse and as kids we called it the chicken coop and there was a teacher by the name of Marguerite Haborak. She was one of the teachers there and Miss Garthway was the other teacher and I can still see it. It was a two room schoolhouse. You walked into the little hallway; there was a bathroom and a sink. When you went to the right there was one classroom and to the left was another and each classroom had a potbelly stove and Mr. Capick was the custodian of the school. When there was a special program at School No. 9, which is on West Avenue, the two teachers would take the children from Hagaman Heights, it had to be a couple of miles I guess, and they would walk the children from the two room schoolhouse to School No. 9 for a special program. Miss Garthway was in the front and Marguerite Haborak was in the back and they would pass our store. That's why we'd see the kids go. But there were one and a half schools, let's put it that way.

*Brenda Velasco:* That two room school, was that a K- 8, too?

*Albina D'Alessio:* No, it was only kindergarten and first grade and then you had to go to No. 9 School on West Avenue. Many years later it burned down. Some young people had lit it and that was the end of our little chicken coop.

*Brenda Velasco:* Quite an experience for anybody to have attended that school.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Oh, it was a great little building. I'm so sorry it's no longer there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then eventually what happened to School No. 9?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well eventually they tear down School No. 9 and they build a new School No. 9 which is now on Turner Street, a very nice building. It's connected with the public library and that's a K-5 school now because they then go to Avenel Middle School from there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then where did you go to Middle School?

*Albina D'Alessio:* We went K to 8 in Port Reading and then we went to Woodbridge High School which is now the Barron Avenue Middle School. So we graduated from what is now the Barron Avenue School and we were on split session. So freshmen went to school in the afternoon, I think it was like 1:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. The morning session ended at 12:30 P.M. I believe. I can't remember the exact starting time but as freshmen you went in the afternoon. If you were the college prep then your sophomore, junior and senior year you went in the morning. But freshmen and sophomores would go in the afternoon.

*Brenda Velasco:* And how did you get there?

*Albina D'Alessio:* By bus. We had a Woodbridge Township School Bus that would pick us up on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and, I think, it was Second Street at that time. Now if you stayed for any activity at Woodbridge Middle School then you had to take the public bus home. There was a bus No. 46 that traveled from Woodbridge to Port Reading and you would take that public bus.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because that was quite a distance for you guys to walk.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* You mentioned briefly the post office. When you first remembered the post office you said it was in a house.

*Albina D'Alessio:* It was Turner Street, the lower level of Turner Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then your dad built a building?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Then he put a building up on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and Turner Street. At that time, I'm not sure how it came about, the post office, the department somehow contacted my dad and they rented the building. Then when (inaudible) came in I guess that went down too, everything went down, and they put the new building up on Port Reading Avenue and Second Street which is the present post office.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was the library? Because you went into education.

*Albina D'Alessio:* We had a very, very, very small library on West Avenue. It was a very small building. It's no longer there, and the other one was what is now the Barron Arts Center. If we had to use the library we would have to get the No. 26 Bus and then go to the Barron Arts center and do any research there.

*Brenda Velasco:* And now the library is on.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* It's connected to School No. 9. It's a very nice library the township put up there.

*Brenda Velasco:* So the students have access?

*Albina D'Alessio:* They have access to it. It's very nice. They can just walk right over to it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then with computers and the internet it's a whole different ballgame.

*Albina D'Alessio:* A whole different story today.

*Brenda Velasco:* Which our generation missed out on.

*Albina D'Alessio:* You know I kind of feel sorry for some of the kids today because I think they're so locked into technology. The technology is marvelous don't get me wrong I think it's fabulous, but the connection between people, I think, is lost.

*Brenda Velasco:* And librarians.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, I mean we lost eight librarians in the school district this year (2009). It's sad because I remember going into the library as kids and asking for a book. They had the book we wanted and they'd help us with it. You know, I remember even at the library one time they even had a course in Italian. You could take a few weeks course in Italian and, you know, it's gone.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about parks?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Oh, parks, that was our best spot. That was on Fourth Street and it was the center of activity for all the children in Port Reading. It even had a wading pool. I think we were the only ones that had this little wading pool and it did have all the equipment, you know, that most playgrounds have: the swings, something called the merry-go-round where we'd all get sick because we'd spin on it so much. But the woman who took care of the playground, not directly related, her name was Viola D'Alessio and she was in charge of the playground activities and we would have different little contests. I remember my dog won first prize for nicest looking dog or something like that. But at the end of the summer, which I thought was very unique, every year, the mothers would get together and they would bake cakes and they would bring them to the playground and we would celebrate the end of the summer season.

*Brenda Velasco:* So it was a communal.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* Communal playground, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was great and how far was it from your house?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Not even a half of block down the street. I mean everything was in close proximity.

*Brenda Velasco:* What a nice community!

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well I think what happened was when I lived on Second Street that group became your family. Then when we moved to Fourth Street that community became your family and I didn't have grandparents here and there was a couple that lived about three or four doors away from us, the Simeone family, and her name was Lucille and her husband was Peter. They were the old people in the street that I knew. They really became my grandparents and we had to call them aunt and uncle. Anybody we had to call aunt and uncle, so we had an awful lot of aunts and uncles in Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was one big family.

*Albina D'Alessio:* It was one big family and everybody knew each other. If you did anything wrong one of those people would come out and let you know that you were not supposed to be doing that and you behaved because you respected them as part of your family.

*Brenda Velasco:* Which reinforces that whole concept of community.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Exactly, and we did everything together. Just to go back for a second about the street, about the church. In May we had a May crowning and the whole town came out. Port Reading Avenue was closed. We would leave the church and we would have a huge procession down Port Reading Avenue and then go into the church. It was a day where the whole town united. It was nice. We did things like that. There was another feast, the Feast of St. Blase, they did the same thing. I don't have the picture anymore because I gave it to St. Anthony's for their 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary but at that time they had a large cart and they would put the statue on it and they would walk through Port Reading Avenue.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, let's just go back with the Feast of St. Blase. That is just prior to the beginning of Lent?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Right in February and in the small town of Pietrastornina that still is a huge feast. In fact, instead of having it in February because it's cold in February, they have it in August and what happens is all of the young people who grew up in Pietrastornina they all come back. I mean the population of Pietrastornina now, I think, the last I read was fifteen hundred but in the summertime it's three or four thousand people. They all come back for this feast and it's still celebrated.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, we already mentioned schools, how about the firehouse?

*Albina D'Alessio:* The original firehouse was on West Avenue. The present firehouse is in the same area but it's a much larger facility and now it's on the corner basically of Port Reading and West Avenue but at that time it was a very small building. I think it could only house maybe one fire truck if I remember correctly.

## **6. What did you do for recreation?**

*Albina D'Alessio:* There was no center, as we know today, for recreation. A lot of what we did was seasonal. There was a season to roller skate, there was a season for hide and seek, for hopscotch, there was a game we called red light. But the one thing I do remember, in the wintertime, at the end of Fourth Street there was an empty lot and the fire truck would come down, would flood the area and we could go ice skating. But most of the things that we did were mostly in the area. There was also a season where kids made their scooters. They would find old roller skate wheels and my father had the grocery store so he'd have to save all the wooden crates that the grapes came in. The kids would come over and my father would save them for them. Then as we got older we were allowed to take Bus #46 on Port Reading Avenue and go to the State Movie Theatre in Woodbridge which is now J.J. Bitting, or in the area of



J.J. Bitting. Halloween was a big event in Port Reading for us. There would be a huge Halloween parade at School No. 9 and the whole town would come out for that. Another thing that drove the community and the school together, at Christmas time, we did the Nativity as part of the Christmas program in School No. 9. So things were basically, I would say, seasonal and holiday related but we created most of our own games.

*Brenda Velasco:* And it helped you.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Oh, it was wonderful.

*Brenda Velasco:* Imagination to go.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I wouldn't give it up for the world.

### **7. What was the focal point of your community at that time?**

*Albina D'Alessio:* I'm going to say St. Anthony's Church basically was the focal point. Again, we were able to have summer school there and we had after school religious classes where two nuns came in from Carteret, Sister Charles and Sister Regina, and they would come to School No. 9 and pick up all the children and we would walk from School No. 9 down, what is now, Milos Way to Port Reading Avenue to Old St. Anthony where we had our religious instruction. We used to call Sister Charles, the general, because she was the general.

*Brenda Velasco:* You did a lot of walking back then?

*Albina D'Alessio:* We did. We always walked. There was nothing. I mean very few people had cars. My father had the truck which sometimes became the taxi for the town. Who had a car? I mean, if there was one or few families with cars, everybody traveled by bus. The women and men who went to work in the morning traveled by bus.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you mother help your father in the store?

*Albina D'Alessio:* She was his right hand. My mother was the business person. My father was the giveaway person. Some would say, well you know I really can't pay this week and he'd say, alright don't worry because they had a little book. My father had the big ledger and each family had a little book and whatever they bought would be recorded in this book and they were supposedly supposed to pay every two weeks when they got paid. Some did, some didn't. But my father would always give them the food, he always did. Just a real quick story, it just came to me. When my father had the bakery and he was delivering bread, he had customers in Rahway and this whole little area. There was a large family, it was the Sica family, who later became the mayor of Carteret.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, yes.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well, I'm not sure if it was Mr. Sica himself but it was the Sica family and my dad always said, I don't know how many children. I mean in those days six or seven or eight kids was nothing, and he used to deliver the bread. Mrs. Sica came up to my father one day and said, please don't deliver bread anymore we can't avoid to pay it. So my father said well I'll still bring it and she said, no, no please don't. So he said, for a few days he didn't and then he said it bothered him because at the end of the day he said he always had

bread left over. So what he would do he would make that his last stop of the day and he would just leave the bread on the porch. Then eventually my dad sold the bakery. When we opened our business in Port Reading, on Fourth Street, a young girl came into the store and I was behind the counter and she asked me is this the place of Carmen D'Alessio? I said, yes. She said, is it possible for me to see him or something to that effect. And in the back of the store in those days you had a little kitchen and he was back there and I called him. She came out and she asked again and my father said yes and she opened her pouch and she pulled out his little brown book in which they would record the amount of bread. She pulled out a twenty dollar bill and she said to my father, my mother made me promise that I would find you and pay you and my father didn't want to take it. He said no, no, no. She was married and had children and she said, no, you must take this. I'll never forget that. So you know those are the things I remember. My father was a good hearted sole. In fact, sometimes, I think he was too good. I mean there's a family that owed us twelve hundred dollars that never paid, in those days, and another family, the Kulich family, owed us something like nine hundred dollars and Mrs. Kulich came to my father and said, I will pay you don't worry. She said she had been injured wherever she worked and sure enough she had a check for, I think it was fourteen hundred dollars and she brought it to my father and paid him the nine hundred dollars and my father gave her the change. So you know you have people who were very honest and people who couldn't have cared less. But they were good times too and I'm glad my father did what he did. I really am.

*Brenda Velasco:* He made you very proud of him.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Very proud of him and my mother, too. My mother was very gifted in knitting and sewing. Women would come and ask, would you shorten this for me. In fact, Dominic Coppola's sister, her name was Jilda, I don't think she was five foot and maybe she was also five feet wide. She would never wear a bra and so every time she bought a dress they wouldn't fit. She would come to my mother and my mother would close the door in the kitchen because she always had her sewing machine there, and she would redo the dresses for Jilda so she could wear them. Jilda was a doll. We all loved her. She was the kindest, sweetest person. You couldn't help but love her. But my mother taught the women how to knit and how to crochet. They would come and they even made liquor together.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's part of the food business, wine.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Not wine. My mother and, her name was Elsie Bobitski, a very good friend, they made anisette, they made *coffeesport*, I think they called it. Then one day I came home from school and the two of them were really giggling and I thought what is going on here. Well, they were tasting and my mother never drank, but they were tasting this liquor as they made it so they got a little happy.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's a good memory.

#### **8. What did you like about living in your section of Woodbridge?**

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well again, it was just one big family and for me, that I didn't have aunts and uncles, I didn't have grandparents, I didn't have cousins. These people became my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles and you know there are still people who are real good friends. The DeBarry family who live up in Hagaman Heights that was one of the first families my mother met. Their son Joe and his wife, and we still visit each other.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you kept the links going even though you moved?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, we're still Port Reading people.

**9. Did you experience any significant happenings in Woodbridge-construction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination, etc.**

*Albina D'Alessio:* Not really. You know, as part of Woodbridge Township was of course the Woodbridge train accident. I was in Woodbridge High School at the time. But I can't think of anything specific in Port Reading that was catastrophic or..... wait I take that back. There was **Oliver Building Blocks** on Port Reading, they made cement blocks, and a young fellow walked there and his arm got caught in the conveyor belt and he lost his arm. That to me, now that I think of it, everybody was devastated for this young man and just recently, at St. Anthony's Church this woman was sitting next to me and we got to talking and it turned out she was this man's daughter.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, so she hasn't moved far.

*Albina D'Alessio:* She lives in Sewaren.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was he from Port Reading?

*Albina D'Alessio:* He was originally from Port Reading, yes. I remember how devastated everybody was because we weren't sure if he would live and he did. He survived and many years later I met this woman and we got to talking and she told me.....

*Brenda Velasco:* What was their last name?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Daniel, the Daniel family. But that was the one thing that I really, now that I think of it I do remember that.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, and then probably if he was a parishioner of St. Anthony's everybody was praying for his recovery.

*Albina D'Alessio:* And his brother is still an usher in the church.

**10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?**

*Albina D'Alessio:* You know what, in spite of some of the changes and in spite of the developments, in many ways, it still has that small town feeling. I mean I can still go on to Main Street and say, oh there's a face I think I know. Maybe because I was involved in the school district and I traveled every section of Woodbridge Township as a supervisor; I still recognize a lot of faces and it's wonderful. It's close to everything. I mean, you're close to schools, you're close to hospitals, you're close to shopping areas and the airport, you know, it's just very convenient. I think it's a great place to live. I don't care what they say about New Jersey at all. I love it and I love Woodbridge Township.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, thank you.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I really do. There are a few things I have concerns about but I love Woodbridge Township. Don't we all, right?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes.

***11. Do you have family members still living in Woodbridge?***

*Albina D'Alessio:* Not in Woodbridge. I have one brother but he lives in Plainfield.

*Brenda Velasco:* So this is the end of the D'Alessio.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, I'm the last one.

*Brenda Velasco:* Are there any other stories that you want to discuss?

*Albina D'Alessio:* I think the one about the World War II Veterans is a very important thing.

*Brenda Velasco:* I think so too. I know this came out when I interviewed Joe (DeMarino) and Vinnie (Martino) and Frank Iacovone and I'd like to hear about this story about the World War II Prisoners of War from Italy.

*Albina D'Alessio:* What had happened was my dad had a cousin in Boston, his name was Nicholas D'Alessio. He was born in Italy but came to the United States and became an American citizen and he was serving in the American Army. He was assigned to a ship that was coming from Italy with prisoners and because he spoke Italian they put him there and they gave him a roster of all the prisoners and as he's looking down the roster he recognized Pietrastornina. So he calls my father and he said that the prisoners were coming in, they would be in Camp Kilmer and perhaps he could make some contact. So my dad called Jo Jo's mother, Clementina, and they found out the name was Vittorio Minichiello/Menichiello and sure enough, after a period of time, my dad had the truck and what we would do, in those days the large soda bottles came in wooden crates, wooden boxes. So we would take those wooden boxes and line them up in the back of my father's truck, it was a closed panel truck; and that's how we would go to Camp Kilmer every Sunday. We went to Camp Kilmer and my dad and Jo Jo's mother, Clementina, went up and asked about the prisoners and they stated there were prisoners there. My father asked if we could see them and they said, yes. So as result of that, every Sunday we would pack a picnic lunch and we would go. Well, one day my dad was talking to one of the people in charge and said, is it possible for him to come to my house for dinner; so he said, yes it's possible. So my father said, well when can I pick him up? He said, oh no, no, no, no, you cannot pick him up. We will deliver him and we will pick him up. Well, it was a Sunday morning and a jeep with MPs arrived with Vittorio and parked in front of our house. Well, when the people saw the MPs they all got frightened because we were Italian; Italy was at war with the United States and they thought they were coming to get my father or family for whatever reason and out came Vittorio with the two MPs. We went up to our house, this was on Second Street, and my mother was an excellent cook; she prepared a wonderful dinner. I can still see him sitting in the middle of this table with an MP on each side and when they were ready to leave my father went up to the MPs and my mother thanked him for bringing Vittorio. The MP turned around and said to my mother, you can invite us anytime. We'll be glad to come back. It was a very exciting time and one more

thing about when we used to go to the camp. My brother was little and my father would walk my brother because sometimes he would get a little restless, sometimes I would walk with them. I'll never forget there was a prisoner, there were barracks and there were like three or four steps that went up to the barracks and this prisoner was sitting there. My father got to talk to him and this prisoner said to my father, is that your son? My father said, yes. He said, do you think I could hug him? I left a son like that back in Italy and my father said, of course. And, as a result, now if you remember during the Second World War you could not buy *Hershey* bars, you could not buy chocolate.

*Brenda Velasco:* You had all the rationing then.

*Albina D'Alessio:* All the rationing, okay. I would go to Camp Kilmer on Sunday, and Jo Jo may remember this too- the prisoners would give us *Hershey* bars. They had them, we didn't, and I would come home every Sunday with a bag of *Hershey* bars. My father in the morning would say, alright you can keep a couple for yourself and you bring them to school and share them with your friends in school. The teachers would say to me, where did you get them? And I'd say, the Prisoners of War. Nobody believed me but that's where we got the *Hershey* bars.

*Brenda Velasco:* How old were you when you were visiting them?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Around ten.

*Brenda Velasco:* So it was around 1944 or 1945?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, I mean if you asked me what I did yesterday I can't tell you but I can tell you about that camp.

*Brenda Velasco:* It stands out in your mind.

*Albina D'Alessio:* They were white barracks, the prisoners had on tan uniforms, the grass was cut clean, it was really nice, you know.

*Brenda Velasco:* And we're talking Camp Kilmer in Edison?

*Albina D'Alessio:* This was Camp Kilmer in Edison, yes. You know one more thing I want to say about Port Reading. The Reading Railroad was a very significant part of our lives, I mean a very, very significant part. And I remember there were days when they still had the steam engines which used a lot of coal and I remember people from Port Reading walking along the railroad tracks collecting coal to heat their homes. Another thing about the railroad, when we would go to school, there is now an overpass. There was the Central Railroad which crossed the Reading Railroad tracks and the trains would come by in the morning and there were gates that would go down and a little man would come out of his little place and he would hold up a stop sign. We would wait and if a freight train went by and we were on our way to school, we would stand there and count the freight trains. We used to call them longees because if we were late getting to school we would say to Mr. Brown, we were caught by a longee and there were a hundred and fifty cars or a hundred and twenty cars. You had to tell the truth because he would call the Reading Railroad office to find out if a train went by at that time. To this day, if I'm on Inman Avenue going into Edison and there's that freight train I still count the freight trains.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because that's at grade level.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, I still count.

*Brenda Velasco:* At that intersection on Inman Avenue.

*Albina D'Alessio:* And another thing that happened during the Second World War for Port Reading there was what we called the troop trains. They would come in on the Reading railroad track which I guess would be the Pennsylvania area. ....

*Brenda Velasco:* They originated in Pennsylvania.

*Albina D'Alessio:* They would then come into the Reading Railroad and switch engines and go out on the Jersey Central line. Now if they were coming from Pennsylvania, we knew that they were going overseas and it would be very quiet. The people would go up to the railroad and it would be a very quiet time and people would wave. I don't remember who the woman was, but all of a sudden she started to cry because the soldiers would have shades and they didn't look out but she saw a hand waving and she said that was her son's hand. She recognized the ring. I can't remember who the woman was, but I was standing next to her. I remember her crying. When they returned from overseas they would come in on the Jersey Central line, go into the Reading Railroad, switch trains and go out. At that time there were cheers and people would applaud. One thing I distinctly remember when I was at the Fourth Street playground. We said, oh a train, we could tell it had a certain sound, we knew the sounds of all the trains, and we said there's a troop train coming. That was the time it was Port Reading Avenue and we used to run through Tappen Street and go up to Port Reading Avenue to see the troop train. As we started to leave the playground we saw a soldier running down Fourth Street. It was Jimmy Zullo. His house was on the corner, it's still there, of Fourth Street and Tappen Street. Of course, he knew he was in Port Reading and he jumped off the train. Can you imagine this, and he ran home. Can you imagine his poor mother when she opened the door and there was her son? He stayed for just a few minutes and somebody had a car or something and they quickly brought him up to the Reading Railroad so he could get in the train so he could go back to camp. So the Reading Railroad really affected us in many ways.

*Brenda Velasco:* Affected you with jobs and connections.

*Albina D'Alessio:* In every way. The worker, the dumpster and the steam engines, I mean, God forbid you got caught in the steam of a steam engine. You were black from the black steam. And you know what, we didn't think anything of it. Ma, I got caught by the steam engine again, you know. Okay take your clothes off. Go take a bath, you know, that was it. And again, as I said, everything was seasonal. Can I give you one more quick story?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, go ahead.

*Albina D'Alessio:* At Christmas time the Italians have the tradition of fish and we had the grocery store. He would get up very, very early in the morning and go to the **Fulton Fish Market** and he would buy the squid and the smelts and the bacalao, the codfish, and the live eels; they had to be alive. While he was gone we had this huge, huge barrel and we would fill it up with water so that when my dad came back there would be water for the eels to be thrown in. It became a feast. The kids would come and it was their job to catch the eels that the women wanted. I have a picture at home some place I'll have to find it. His

name was Ben Minucci. Ben Minucci was a physical education teacher in Woodbridge Township and he was one of the first kids that would come and grab the eels, they were alive, and my dad had to put them in a sack. Then we'd weigh them and then they'd get out of the sack and they would roll all over the place and you know how slimy they are. But the kids could come and catch the eels if they got permission from their parents and if they wore their oldest clothes because the slime from the eels was really very, very bad. Again everything was seasonal. We'd bake certain things for the Easter season and we'd bake certain things for Christmas. Right now there was a woman who just recently passed away and I miss her terribly she's one of the last ones from Port Reading, her name was Pat Barbato Surik.

*Brenda Velasco:* I missed her by a day. I had her scheduled.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I miss her terribly. She lived in Woodbridge and what she would do is she would call me up and say, you know what it's getting close to Lent now make sure you make the *migliacelo*. *Migliacelo* is a macaroni pie. Okay, Pat I'll remember to make it. Did you make it? Yes, okay. At Easter she would say, don't forget you got to make this, you got to make the ricotta pie, you got to make the ham pie and she would do this and I loved it. I looked forward to her calling me and I really, really miss her terribly, I really do. I miss a lot of people of Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* You have good memories.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I have excellent memories. I loved the town. I was very proud of Port Reading and I still am. I still consider myself a Port Reading person.

*Brenda Velasco:* Before we began the conversation you mentioned how one of the things that you are so proud of is that so many people were immigrants and the children were first born and so many went to school, so many went to college.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I can name like six people from Port Reading who became principals in the district. Of course one of them was Kenny Kuchak who became superintendent. The Zullios became doctors, we had three. Al Russo is a lawyer. My brother became an industrial designer. I mean, the kids went to school.

*Brenda Velasco:* And it was encouraged.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Oh, you had to go.

*Brenda Velasco:* It wasn't destructive but education was encouraged.

*Albina D'Alessio:* I didn't realize that you could stop going to school after high school. I mean we were under the impact to go to college. You know there was like Leo Ciuffredia was the principal, Ralph Coppola became a principal, George Dwyer, Charles Scarpaletti became a principal, Kenny Kuchak was a principal and then became superintendent and I'm one of the principals. I hope I didn't forget anybody.

*Brenda Velasco:* And we just want to mention about you how you led and formed the department.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* Well with Mr. Burns. I have to admit, Mr. Burns and Roz Gross, I worked hand in hand with them.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what was the specific title of your department?

*Albina D'Alessio:* Department of Special Education.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because it's gone through.....

*Albina D'Alessio:* It's no longer that situation. It's different.

*Brenda Velasco:* But I wanted to mention that and it was known throughout the State of New Jersey.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Yes, in fact, the Glen Cove School, which is now the Matthew Jago School, at one time people would come from all over the State. It was really a school that was able to combine regular elementary education with meeting the special needs of students. There were sixth graders at that time that would go in and read to the little special ed kids and at lunchtime some of the sixth graders would take care of the little ones. One year the State of New Jersey contacted Woodbridge, I knew the lady, so she called me and said you have this new school, we would like to have classes for the hearing impaired. We will be willing to wire two classrooms if Woodbridge would accept it. So Woodbridge did and we have two classrooms that were wired for this instruction of students with hearing impairments. It was there for a number of years and then eventually other districts, you know they were mostly tuition students who came in, but the Glen Cove School at that time had a swimming pool, a home arts room and it had an industrial arts room. The children all worked together. I mean it was a wonderful, wonderful atmosphere.

*Brenda Velasco:* A unique atmosphere.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Very, very much so.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where things (education) were mainstream.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Very much so.

*Brenda Velasco:* And this is why you're in the forefront.

*Albina D'Alessio:* And one more, I'm not patting myself on the back, but the Camp Pace Program, I think, is part of Woodbridge's history in Port Reading/Sewaren. We were teaching in Keasbey, there were two teachers; her name was Victoria Wisnefski and at that time Matthew Jago was the principal. A Vicky and I were teaching special ed and we realized that when we came back in September that the children had lost their skills. They just sat in front of the television, they had no friends and they did nothing. I remember we were talking at a meeting and I think it was Mr. Jago who said, you know I think the federal government is giving some money. Let's see what we could do. Sure enough we did some investigating and we wrote a Grant called the Camp Pace Program, the three of us. It was Matt Jago, Vicky Wisnefski and myself and we wrote this program and we got fifty thousand dollars. This was in the early '60s, I think. I don't remember the exact date right now. It was a summer program in which we reinforced the skills. We had a swimming program, we had a bowling program, we had the home arts, and we had the little industrial arts program. The final week of the camp we went camping in Pennsylvania for one week.

*Brenda Velasco:* God bless you.

*Albina D'Alessio:* So the first week we would take a hundred children and the second week we would take another hundred and the teachers would come and



they got paid a hundred dollars a week to stay there. Buzzy Estok, who was a teacher in the district, I love Buzzy, and he would come and he would say, can I drive my car. I don't want to rent one. Let me drive my car. Okay, you can drive your car Buzzy and I used to drive the township station wagon because we had extra supplies in there and it turned out that if somebody needed a blanket Buzzy had it in the back of his car. If somebody needed an extra bathing suit, Buzzy had it in the back of his car. Buzzy and his mother would pack his car and anticipate what might be needed. It went on for, well it still goes but it's not the same program that we started. But the kids, I still see a couple of my adult students who still remember Camp Pace, who still remember camping, who still remember riding horses and canoeing.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you had happy memories of Port Reading and you gave happy memories back.

*Albina D'Alessio:* That's very nice to say.

*Brenda Velasco:* That is a nice continuity but it comes from Port Reading.

*Albina D'Alessio:* It comes from Port Reading. Everything started in Port Reading.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well it's been a privilege to have interviewed you.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Thank you, it's my pleasure. As a proud resident of Port Reading I was happy to do this.

*Brenda Velasco:* And as a resident of Woodbridge I'm so glad you were in education. You inspired many people.

*Albina D'Alessio:* Thank you so much.

*Brenda Velasco:* But thank you.

*Albina D'Alessio:* You're welcome I'm sure.