

Oral History Interview
Ben Jackson
WH061

(written transcript and digital audio)

On Friday, August 28, 2009, Ben Jackson was interviewed at the Main Branch of the Henry Inman Library by Brenda Velasco at 12 Noon.

Brenda Velasco: Some of these questions are going to target an organization that was founded many years ago in Colonia called the Independent Club of Colonia.

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

Ben Jackson: My name is Benjamin F. Jackson. I live in Colonia, New Jersey on Delaware Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And what is your date of birth?

Ben Jackson: My date of birth is 4/22/34.

Brenda Velasco: So you're well over sixty-five years old.

Ben Jackson: Yes, I am.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and you meet the criteria.

2. How long have you lived in Colonia?

Ben Jackson: Forty-three years.

Brenda Velasco: When did you originally first move to Colonia?

Ben Jackson: 1966 in June.

3. Why did you or your family move to Colonia or this section of Woodbridge?

Ben Jackson: We moved to this section of Woodbridge because I had trouble finding a nice place to rent in Newark. They had some nice sections in Newark but they always said we didn't make enough money. My wife had a job as a teacher and I was working in industry at the time and then later I became a teacher. We talked to several real estate agencies and they took us around to places like Avenel, Colonia and we even went to places in Metuchen. We saw the house in Colonia and we liked that so that's the one we took.

Brenda Velasco: At that time, in 1966, you had a grade school right across the street.

Ben Jackson: Yes, School No. 17.

Brenda Velasco: And you had stores there?

Ben Jackson: Right, there were stores right down the street. There was a shopping area and a bank and everything in the immediate area. They were close enough to walk to them if you wanted to.

4. What did you like about living in your section of Woodbridge?

Ben Jackson: It was a nice section. The people I met were real nice and congenial and all and several people welcomed us to the neighborhood.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall what you paid for your house in 1966 when you moved?

Ben Jackson: Not exactly but I believe it was twenty-two thousand and five hundred dollars.

Brenda Velasco: And this is when real estate was much cheaper in Colonia.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You couldn't get your house for that price in 2009.

Ben Jackson: No.

Brenda Velasco: So you did quite well.

Ben Jackson: Right.

5. Independent Club of Colonia

a. How did you first learn of this Club?

Brenda Velasco: Was the Independent Club already established by the time you.....

Ben Jackson: The Independent Club was established when I moved here. In fact, I moved next door to the Independent Club. There was a person who lived in our neighborhood that friends of ours had known, and they told us about the Independent Club.

Brenda Velasco: Did you immediately become a member of it?

Ben Jackson: Not immediately, within about a year.

Brenda Velasco: Because you were working.

Ben Jackson: I was working, my wife was working and we were always on the move.

Brenda Velasco: Did you know anybody in the neighborhood before you moved to that house on Delaware Avenue?

Ben Jackson: No but a lady named Joan Sandler and her husband Stanley, some friends of ours were friends of theirs for a long time.

Brenda Velasco: Okay. But this must have been quite a contrast from Newark which was a very busy metropolis at the time.

Ben Jackson: It was, it was real busy and in around Newark at the time when we moved here we did live in East Orange for a while and then East Orange was a nice city at that time, too.

Brenda Velasco: And you have beautiful homes in East Orange.

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So you moved in '66 so you missed the riots in Newark. (July 1967)

Ben Jackson: Yes, I did. I was working when the riots were going on.

Brenda Velasco: How did you make it home because the streets were closed and everything?

Ben Jackson: The streets weren't closed on Bloomfield Avenue and I'd go to Bloomfield Avenue to take the Parkway. I had a sister who lived right in the middle of the riots.

Brenda Velasco: In the Central Ward then?

Ben Jackson: In the Central Ward.

Brenda Velasco: Was she safe?

Ben Jackson: Yes, nothing happened but several kids in the neighborhood got killed or got shot. There was a lot of looting and everything going on at that time.

Brenda Velasco: I remember because I lived in Linden at that time and I was also teaching so it spilled over, you know, and I also took a vacation at that time. Okay and the Parkway was safe to travel?

Ben Jackson: Yes, I would go Bloomfield Avenue. Well that's the way I would go all the time, Bloomfield Avenue, because I worked off Fourth Street at a place called **Herculite Protective Fabrics.**

Brenda Velasco: Where did your wife teach then?

Ben Jackson: She was teaching on Middle Street in Newark.

Brenda Velasco: It was an elementary school then?

Ben Jackson: It was an elementary school.

Brenda Velasco: And the riots were during the summer so therefore she was in Colonia by then.

Ben Jackson: She was here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: But that section wasn't the real section where the riots were going; it was about five blocks away.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so by that time you were here in Colonia in your house on Delaware Avenue pretty safe.

b. Why did you become a member of the Independent Club of Colonia?

Ben Jackson: Well the Independent Club of Colonia had a welcoming committee. They would go around to the new people's houses and introduce themselves and they had a kit where they would give you information about different stores and different places to shop and mention all the areas and how to get to these different places.

Brenda Velasco: That was great especially if you were new coming from Essex County.

Ben Jackson: I also worked on that welcoming committee for awhile.

Brenda Velasco: So this welcoming committee was rather successful then because it drew people in.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Was it just Colonia that it drew people in from?

Ben Jackson: No, it was not just Colonia we had members from Edison, Avenel, Iselin and I believe Woodbridge Proper itself.

Brenda Velasco: These were blacks, African-Americans?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so it wasn't just based in Colonia and they would have the welcoming committee go out to the new residents in Edison as well? Because Edison, Potter's Crossing, was just down here.

Ben Jackson: No.

c. How long were you a member of the Independent Club of Colonia?

Ben Jackson: I'm still a member now. Actually I've been a member for forty-two years.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! And you're one of the few still living in the area then.

Ben Jackson: No there are more that still live in the area.

Brenda Velasco: Good, because we're going to get them to be interviewed too. Okay, so forty-two years.

Ben Jackson: There are at least four couples who live in Colonia that moved here during the same time I did, within a couple of months.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall their names?

Ben Jackson: The Bacons, Dotty and Rosco Bacon, Sam and Vi DuPree.

Brenda Velasco: I already got Sam. He moved from Elizabeth.

Ben Jackson: There's a Henry Smith that lives in the neighborhood, too. He didn't move the same time I did but in the house he lived in there was a Dr. Ralph Grant, former president of the Independent Club.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Ralph Grant?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, but he doesn't live there any longer?

Ben Jackson: No, he moved back to Newark.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: There's one more.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, good.

Ben Jackson: Booker Wilkens and his wife.

Brenda Velasco: Wilkens?

Ben Jackson: Wilkens.

Brenda Velasco: Wilkens, okay and does he live in Colonia still?

Ben Jackson: He shares his house with his son.

Brenda Velasco: Alright. Some of these people I perhaps will be able to get also to be interviewed.

Ben Jackson: There's somebody else but I don't remember her name.

Brenda Velasco: I know Beverly McDaniels Webb is the one that is helping me as well as Glenn Morgan setting up interviews.

d. Did you hold any offices in the Independent Club?

Ben Jackson: I was vice-president in 1972 and I worked on the welcoming committee.

Brenda Velasco: How many members were there when you were actively involved?

Ben Jackson: I would say at least thirty-five.

Brenda Velasco: Thirty-five families more or less or members?

Ben Jackson: Members.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

e. What services did the Independent Club of Colonia provide for you and your family?

Ben Jackson: They had an annual picnic in August. There was a big fundraiser in November when they had a dance and my wife sponsored several of those committees.

Brenda Velasco: So she was involved too?

Ben Jackson: Yes. That was for partial scholarships given to students from Colonia High School. We had, during the week, a public speaking class taught by Ralph Grant and a reading class taught by Picola Jackson.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, is that person related to you?

Ben Jackson: My wife.

Brenda Velasco: Okay the teacher.

Ben Jackson: And I taught basic math skills.

Brenda Velasco: So you had like mentoring programs going on, that's great, that was great for the kids.

Ben Jackson: There was another teacher who taught American History. I don't recall his name though. Certain holidays, like Easter, we used to have an egg hunt. There were bus rides to see plays. We went to Hershey, Pennsylvania a couple of times and Washington, D.C. was one of the trips.

Brenda Velasco: So were these trips geared for the kids or adults or families?

Ben Jackson: Some were for adults; almost all included the youngsters like the trips to Hershey, Pennsylvania and Washington. They also went to see plays in New Brunswick that they would take the kids also.

Brenda Velasco: Is that the George Street Playhouse or there was a black Crossroads Theatre there which was the African-American.....

Ben Jackson: I think it was the Crossroads.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: We also went to plays in Woodbridge they had the Circle Playhouse in Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: This was all during the 1970s when you were.....

Ben Jackson: In the '70s or early '80s.

Brenda Velasco: So this was a busy place.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Especially for kids and you were teaching by this time also?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Where did you teach?

Ben Jackson: I taught in Iselin Junior High which later became Iselin Middle School. The most shocking thing was one year I had to teach a course in careers.

Brenda Velasco: In careers?

Ben Jackson: In careers. The first marking period was terrible but the last one was outstanding.

Brenda Velasco: Well you're a good example of changing careers because you went from industry and then you went into teaching.

Ben Jackson: I was also in the military.

Brenda Velasco: Well, they picked the right person then to teach.

Ben Jackson: I spent four years in the Marines and I also grew up on a farm in South Georgia.

Brenda Velasco: Wow you really came.....

Ben Jackson: I came a long way.

Brenda Velasco: You sure did.

Ben Jackson: That was the cotton picking, tobacco fields, peanut fields, government pecans, growing gardens and all of that.

Brenda Velasco: They picked the right person for that. Did you have a garden in your house on Delaware?

Ben Jackson: Yes, I had a garden. I've been in Colonia for forty-three years, and I had a garden for thirty-six.

Brenda Velasco: Can't get rid of those farm roots can you?

Ben Jackson: The last three years I didn't grow a garden.

Brenda Velasco: Basically we're using pots right now for our garden so we don't have to till the soil. It's much easier that way.

Ben Jackson: It's easier that way but the best is to get out there with the hoe.

Brenda Velasco: I know especially with the Jersey tomatoes.

f. What were some memorable event or activities that you recall?

Brenda Velasco: Did you have some speakers that came in?

Ben Jackson: We had speakers; one person was named Melvin Charles. He wrote a book and was trying to introduce a flag, the black flag. We had a principal come and speak. His name was James Garrett. He was a principle from the south side of Newark.

Brenda Velasco: Now did they address the teenagers, the kids?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: I know some of the other people that I interviewed also mentioned Jack Fay coming.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Well when Jack Fay came to the.....

Ben Jackson: I didn't really make that meeting, I couldn't be there.

Brenda Velasco: Because I think he was a committee man from your area, Colonia, at one time.

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else?

Ben Jackson: We had Mayor Gibson come out.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, Ken Gibson from Newark.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: When he was mayor still?

Ben Jackson: Right. There was a preacher that also came down, I don't recall his name.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: My niece, LaVerne Crodock, basically to the youth about life in the projects in Newark.

Brenda Velasco: Because these kids didn't grow up in Newark, they grew up basically in one family single homes in Colonia.

Ben Jackson: Right. My niece now lives in Pennsylvania, she owns her own house.

Brenda Velasco: Now these were tumultuous times. This was a transition where you had the Civil Rights Act passed (1964), Voting Rights Acts (1965) and you had the riots but the '80s were a period of transition. Do you have anything else you want to add to Question F?

Ben Jackson: In the late '70s or early '80s the team from Colonia High School went undefeated (1974 and 1975) and another big time was the first time they beat J.P. Stevens.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we're talking football?

Ben Jackson: Yes, right. Several of the students in the neighborhood were on the football team.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! Do you recall any of the names?

Ben Jackson: Glenn Morgan was one of them.

Brenda Velasco: Of course.

Ben Jackson: And his brother, Derek Morgan, was another one.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: Rod Johnson was on the team and Blaine Sadler. My son, Rodney Jackson, was on the team and a kid named Kevin Brown. His father owned a drug store in Newark. There were several others but I don't remember their names right now.

Brenda Velasco: As a father you must have really been bursting with pride?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Very good and this was Colonia High School?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: I'll have to get from Glenn what year this was because he would remember the year.

Ben Jackson: Oh, there were some Boston brothers that played too.

Brenda Velasco: What were there names again?

Ben Jackson: David Boston.

Brenda Velasco: David.

Ben Jackson: Bruce.

Brenda Velasco: Bruce.

Ben Jackson: And there was a Brian, I think, Brian Boston.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of brothers there, so they all played on that football team as well?

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: One of the most successful.

Ben Jackson: Well they were probably there at different times.

Brenda Velasco: Very good. Did you do any coaching while you were at Iselin Middle School?

Ben Jackson: Yes, I was a bowling coach.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, well bowling is back in fashion.

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: This was a successful club for quite a while. (Independent Club of Colonia).

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: Why do you think it was so successful?

Ben Jackson: Because there seemed to be a common interest from everyone. They wanted to try to improve and make things better for the children so they would have something to grow up and look forward to. Everyone seemed to be role models. If you saw someone doing something you could say something to the person and if they ran back to their parents the parents would say well what did you do?

Brenda Velasco: So everybody enforced a common set of values?

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: And this is what made that neighborhood so unique.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

g. Why do you think membership declined?

Ben Jackson: Well some of the people in the neighborhood moved away and then we got older and there was no replacing us.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: And the younger people moved away or went to school or went in the service and so they weren't here to pick it up.

Brenda Velasco: Right, there wasn't that continuity. Because if they went into service.....

Ben Jackson: A lot of them moved.

Brenda Velasco: They didn't come back to Colonia, we lost them. Is there anything else you want to add about the Independent Club of Colonia?

Ben Jackson: No not now.

6. While you lived in Colonia did you experience any significant happenings-construction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination?

Ben Jackson: There was something that happened, probably an accident, a fire at the Jackson's.

Brenda Velasco: Were the Jackson's related to you?

Ben Jackson: No.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, another Jackson family then.

Ben Jackson: And the neighborhood, all nationalities, chipped in and rebuilt that house. All nationalities did that.

Brenda Velasco: I think the fire department also did some fundraising for it.

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So this was the whole broad community?

Ben Jackson: Yes, it was a whole community. There was one that was the Independent Club and there was the Colonia Civic Club that chipped in and helped. In fact the Independent Club started out in the Colonia Civic Club.

Brenda Velasco: Oh I didn't realize that and that's on Inman Avenue right across from St. Gertrude's Cemetery, am I correct?

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: I think there's an Alphabet Academy Day Care Center there right now.

Ben Jackson: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So that was originally where the Independent Club of Colonia started?

Ben Jackson: Right and the township donated the land and the neighborhood built the Independent Club where it is now.

Brenda Velasco: And that's right across from Colonia Middle School.

Ben Jackson: And there was a terrible accident where a youngster was crossing the Parkway. The kid got hit by a Volkswagen and unfortunately it was one of the Jackson boys.

Brenda Velasco: My God, that family had a lot of tragedy.

Ben Jackson: Since then they put up all these high fences along the Parkway where nothing can be dropped overboard and they can't walk across the Parkway.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall the year?

Ben Jackson: Of that accident?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, or the fire.

Ben Jackson: I don't know the year of the fire but the accident was like '75 or '76.

Brenda Velasco: And the other Jackson family how many people were in that family?

Ben Jackson: I'm not sure but I think it was about twelve.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Ben Jackson: A lady who used to work with me, her name was Gladys Jackson, I don't recall her husband's name but he became a pilot from that family, an airplane pilot.

Brenda Velasco: And that's the same family?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So the son became an airplane pilot?

Ben Jackson: Yes and another member of that family drowned in the Rahway River.

Brenda Velasco: Are there any Jacksons that still live in.....

Ben Jackson: I think they all moved out. I see one brother, Otis Jackson, he lives in Linden. I think the father still lives but I don't think he lives in the house where they originally lived.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, but you think he lives in the Colonia area?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That family had a lot of tragedy.

Ben Jackson: They sure did. I guess one of the major constructions is when they built **Foodtown**, they built that.

Brenda Velasco: Where the **Foodtown** is now?

Ben Jackson: Yes, where the **Foodtown** is now it was all trees and everything. They tore that down and built up that area. I think the first place there was **The Big Apple** or something like that. It was a supermarket.

Brenda Velasco: You're absolutely right, it was a supermarket. Then it became a **ShopRite** for a little while?

Ben Jackson: Yes a **ShopRite** for a little while and then **Foodtown**.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so you've seen the traffic on Inman Avenue increase?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: We all have.

Ben Jackson: There were no riots around and discrimination, I've heard people say something but I didn't come across it.

Brenda Velasco: So it wasn't a bad place to live, Colonia?

Ben Jackson: No.

7. What do you like about Colonia today?

Ben Jackson: Colonia today is still a nice place to live and the people are friendly. They show a concern.

Brenda Velasco: And you still keep in contact with some of your neighbors I assume.

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So you've got a neighborhood.

Ben Jackson: Right, we still have a neighborhood. We have a block party on Pine Street which was supposed to be tomorrow but it was cancelled.

Brenda Velasco: It was cancelled. This was at Queenie Coley's house?

Ben Jackson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: She applied for the permit I remember. Do you have a rain date for it?

Ben Jackson: I think it's the third of September.

Brenda Velasco: Because they are just forecasting rain straight through which is too bad. So you still have a lot of your neighbors?

Ben Jackson: Right.

8. Do you still have any family members living in Colonia or Woodbridge today?

Ben Jackson: No.

Brenda Velasco: But your son moved to Plainfield?

Ben Jackson: Yes, Plainfield.

Brenda Velasco: Which isn't too far from here?

9. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?

Ben Jackson: No.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so I thank you very much Ben Jackson. We finally were able to get together.

Ben Jackson: After all these months.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, we got it together. Okay, thank you.

Ben Jackson: You're welcome.



After the formal interview concluded, Ben Jackson recalled when he lived in Valdosta, Georgia. When he was in high school, he did gardening for a white family and the gentleman would barely acknowledge him. However, when he heard Ben was entering the Marinas, he gave him some advice that he never forgot: "stay focused".

Ben was a Marine from July 1, 1953 – June 30, 1957. With the GI Bill, he was able to secure an education at Florida, A&M. After graduation he settled in Newark where his mother lived. Newark was in its economic heyday with many factories. His mother worked at Westinghouse and Swift Meatpacking.