

Oral History Interview
Bruce Christensen
WH055

(written transcript and digital audio)

On July 10, 2009, Bruce Christensen was interviewed at the Woodbridge Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 1:00 P.M.

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

Bruce Christensen: My name is Bruce Lynwood Christensen. My date of birth is March 20, 1943. I live in the Woodbridge Proper section of the township.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Bruce Christensen: I've lived in the township for roughly sixty-three years. As indicated I've lived in Woodbridge the majority of my life.

Brenda Velasco: And you come from a unique family so when I ask that third question, *Why did you or your family move to Woodbridge.* Let's look at your maternal as well as your paternal ancestors.

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

Bruce Christensen: My mother was a Drummond but her mother was a Dunham, the Jonathan Dunham family clan, and as most know Jonathan Dunham set up the first gristmill here in the late 1660s. I'm fortunate to be able to trace my roots back to that particular period of time in Woodbridge history. My grandfather, on the paternal side, came over from Denmark in March of 1888 around the time of the great blizzard of '88. Just recently we've done some research trying to find out the ship that he came over on. One of my nieces was able to get information on that and found out that he came over on a ship from Germany rather than Denmark. Since Ellis Island was not open at that time the ship had to land off Castle Gardens off of New York. After he came to this area, he actually was a tailor by trade, he was eighteen years old, he worked for a period of time for a tailor in Perth Amboy. As many know, at that time, Perth Amboy had a large Scandinavian population.

Brenda Velasco: And is that why he settled in this area because of the.....

Bruce Christensen: Basically because of the large Scandinavian population. Of course there were a number of Scandinavians that had moved out to Minnesota and other areas but in terms of the East Coast one of the highest concentrations was here.

Brenda Velasco: Why did he leave Denmark?

Bruce Christensen: He left for a number of reasons. A couple of his brothers had already come to the U.S. before that, and they felt that there would be economic opportunities. One of the brothers settled out in the West and eventually worked at a lumbering company out there. All told, I think

there were six or seven brothers. Eventually, all of them came over to the U.S. Finally back in the 1930s my great grandmother also came over to the U.S. after her husband passed away. It was interesting about fifteen years ago I was able to go over to that section of Denmark where my grandfather was born, a little town called Sonderberg on the west coast of Jutland in Denmark and we visited his homestead which still had the traditional thatched roof. Some may be familiar with Captain Kurk Carlson. He lived about twenty miles away on the west coast of Jutland as well and we also had an opportunity to visit the village where he grew up as a young boy.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of connections there.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So your family goes way back in the history of Woodbridge to its early founding members with the Dunhams on one side, maternally, and then your grandfather came over during the late 1800s. But we're going to concentrate on the physical changes that you've witnessed.

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

Bruce Christensen: Of course one of the main things that's notable is the fact that the population of Woodbridge has certainly blossomed. We're no longer a little rural or semi-rural community. We are, of course, part of the greater New York metropolitan area and that certainly is very evident now. When I was growing up, of course, there were no malls and, of course, during my lifetime we witnessed the opening of Menlo Park mall, the Woodbridge Center mall and many of the numerous strip malls found throughout the township. In terms of the houses and streets, of course, Woodbridge is certainly at a transportation crossroads. I can remember, as a boy, the construction of the New Jersey Turnpike and, of course, some have heard of the Woodbridge train wreck and that occurred roughly at a time when a trestle was being constructed across the Turnpike in the area of Fulton Street in Woodbridge (1951). Of course we have many additional houses of worship. Recently I came across some pictures of the earlier St. James Churches and, of course, the new edifices on the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue. In terms of schools, I was a member of the first class to enter Woodbridge High School in about 1956 or 1957. We just have to check that date. At that time we had the eighth grade in the high school. We went double sessions. When I graduated in 1961 we had a graduating class of over nine hundred. A few years later, I think it was around 1964, I may have the wrong year, Kennedy High School opened alleviating some of the crowding and then finally in 1967 Colonia High School opened its doors.

Brenda Velasco: I'm glad you mentioned that Woodbridge High School was the only high school for a while. So you were in the class of 1961 which had a large graduating class.

Bruce Christensen: Yes. In fact in two years we will have our fiftieth anniversary coming up which seems incredible.

Brenda Velasco: That means me too. Okay, let's go back, where did you live when you were growing up in Woodbridge, on what street?

Bruce Christensen: When I was young I grew up on Prospect Avenue. It's now referred to as East Prospect Avenue because there is a continuation on the other side of the tracks. I lived there until the time I was married in 1967. Then I lived, for a short period of time in Edison, and then I moved back to Woodbridge on Lockwood Avenue and have lived there since that time.

Brenda Velasco: Now many people recognize your surname because of the department store. Do you want to talk a little bit about that and how it got established?

Bruce Christensen: I mentioned my grandfather moving over to the United States from Denmark. Around the same time a brother of my grandfather, my grandfather's name was Christian Christensen, and his brother Jens Peder, or John Peter Christensen, followed him about a year later. He, likewise, was a tailor. After working for another employer, in Perth Amboy, they decided to branch out on their own, open a small tailor shop in Woodbridge itself. Then later they decided to expand it and branch off into other areas of clothing. So officially **Christensen's Department Store** began in 1895 until it closed down a hundred and three years later. After my grandfather and his brother ceased working there, or they decided to retire, my father and two uncles carried on the business; and then somewhat later my brother Jerry, my sister Beverly and myself carried on the business.

Brenda Velasco: And that was one of the most famous businesses on Main Street.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You were known as the "friendly store", I think.

Bruce Christensen: Yes, noted as the "friendly store". I can recall my father recounting some unique aspects of the business. The business's first building was on the south side of Main Street. About five years later they moved over to the north side and actually the building that was occupied for a few years later became a fish store and I think it's a restaurant at the present time. Just before the great Depression (1930s), my grandfather and his brother decided that they would build a new building, again on the south side and the building was nearly completed when word came that there was going to be a banking collapse. This was at the time of the Depression. My grandfather quickly went over to the bank; he was able to withdraw funds and pay off the workers. That was about a day before the bank closed its doors. During the Depression things were very rough. In fact, we did all that we could to extend courtesies to the patrons. In fact, at that time, many of the township workers were paid in script. We, as a business, honored the township's script and there was even a form of barter system that went on for a period of time. We often would exchange shoes or garments for some services by certain employees so it was a unique situation at that time.

Brenda Velasco: And it was adapting to the conditions of the Depression.

Bruce Christensen: It was adapting to the conditions, yes.

Brenda Velasco: So this was in the 1930s then?

Bruce Christensen: The early 1930s, yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, anything else you want to relay about Christensen's?

Bruce Christensen: One of my earliest memories, when I was young, and this used to attract a number of people. We had a shoe department with **Buster Brown** shoes and the **Buster Brown Company** furnished us with a machine, it was an x-ray machine that we would use it to see whether the shoes fit properly; and later on when frequent use of x-rays became a health hazard, of course, **Buster Brown** and others discontinued use of this machine. But it was always a fascination to stick your foot in this machine and see how much toe room that you had.

Brenda Velasco: I forgot about that. Okay, what were some of the other things that you sold at the store?

Bruce Christensen: One of the things that I remember as a boy, when you first came in the store there was a big case in the front of the store containing various styles of men's hats; homburg's and different types of fedoras. This was very popular at this particular time. During the early years we did sell some appliances, too. However we didn't continue that for a long period of time.

Brenda Velasco: Did the store include the sale of linens?

Bruce Christensen: There were some initially: ribbon and other dry goods at first.

Brenda Velasco: And also we were the big center for the scouting.....

Bruce Christensen: Later on, we had the Boy Scout and Girl Scout franchise in the area and that was very successful and we worked quite closely with both organizations.

Brenda Velasco: People would come from all over, even outside of Woodbridge because you had that franchise which was very helpful. Alright, how about the streets, were they paved at the time of.....

Bruce Christensen: Some of the streets were paved. I can remember a few streets up in what was called the Edgar Hill area, that's up in the vicinity of Ridgedale and Prospect. I can recall a few of the streets were not paved at this time.

Brenda Velasco: So they were gravel or dirt?

Bruce Christensen: Some were gravel, some were dirt.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Bruce Christensen: Actually my father has a picture of Main Street in around 1900, roughly the time he was born in 1909 on Main Street. And the picture that he has of Main Street at that time shows Main Street as a dirt street.

Brenda Velasco: It's changed quite a bit!

Bruce Christensen: Quite a bit.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, anything else you want to discuss about, oh, what school did you go to?

Bruce Christensen: Well I went to the old School #1 which is presently the Administration building. I have a couple memories from that time. One day I was privileged to be able to go up and actually ring the bell that was still up

in the bell tower there. And if you had a good attendance record for the week sometimes you were chosen or the month you were chosen to be able to do that. Another memory during the '50s and early '60s, there were bomb drills and we would have to go down into the basement of old School #1 and seek some form of shelter there.

Brenda Velasco: Those were the air raid drills.

Bruce Christensen: The air raid drills, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And that was right after World War II.

Bruce Christensen: Yes and the Korean War time, too.

Brenda Velasco: Then you attended the Middle School?

Bruce Christensen: After attending School No. 1, I moved over to what is now the Ross Street School, School No. 11. I was there for a few years for grades six and seven; they had grades K through five in School No. 1. When I moved over to Ross Street, we just had grades six and seven. In eighth grade, as I said, I moved over to Woodbridge High School because it had the capacity at that time.

Brenda Velasco: That was the new high school?

Bruce Christensen: That was the new high school.

Brenda Velasco: So you never went to Barron Avenue School?

Bruce Christensen: No I bypassed, somehow, Barron Avenue. My father attended Barron Avenue as well as my mother.

Brenda Velasco: And that was the old Woodbridge High School.

Bruce Christensen: The old Woodbridge High School, yes. I have a couple of memories of the area around Woodbridge High School. I can remember about 1952 there was a traveling circus that set up on the site of Woodbridge High School and we attended the circus for a few days there. There was also a fairly sizable pond behind the high school. We used to call it Frog Pond and we used to go ice skating on in the wintertime. It's up by the athletic fields. I could remember, on a Saturday, we would often make a day of it. We would bring a small frying pan or a pan, can of beans and maybe some hotdogs and that was our recreation for the day, playing hockey on that pond.

Brenda Velasco: Let's go back to question five. We jumped from four to six.

5. What public buildings/property were there?-post office. Library, parks, firehouse, schools etc.

Brenda Velasco: Since you grew up in Woodbridge Proper, where was the post office when you were growing up?

Bruce Christensen: I believe the post office was on Pearl Street when I first grew up and, of course, it has changed locations many times. The library occupied the present Barron Arts Center. Later on it moved to Rahway Avenue but when I grew up we used the Barron Arts Center facility.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so when you say it moved to Rahway Avenue you meant the old **Cameo** was?

Bruce Christensen: The old **Cameo** yes.

Brenda Velasco: And that's **Arianna's** right now.

Bruce Christensen: I never used any of the branch libraries. There might have been a few branch libraries. I know there was a small Colonia branch library (Chain O' Hills and New Dover). There may have been a few others.

Brenda Velasco: You were in Woodbridge Proper so we're just going to concentrate on Woodbridge Proper. How about parks?

Bruce Christensen: One of the areas that was maintained as a park that we utilized a lot was off of Freeman Street. There was a house later built on part of that property that was built by Mr. Boyers who had the machine works. I believe there's an exterminating company there now but it used to be called the Freeman Street Park. Of course, Merrill Park did not exist at that time. We did go to Rahway Park and we did go to Roosevelt Park. Other than that, there were small neighborhood recreational parks. One was behind the high school and a few others located around.

Brenda Velasco: How about the firehouse?

Bruce Christensen: The firehouse was still on School Street.

Brenda Velasco: I think that sums it up for that question because we already discussed the schools and your unique experience of never having attended the Barron Avenue School. You escaped it.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Brenda Velasco: Anything else for recreation because you mentioned about the ice skating and the hockey down by the high school Frog Pond, and you mentioned the traveling circus. Can you think of anything else?

Bruce Christensen: There was not as much concern for safety at this time. Woodbridge was a very safe community. The surrounding communities were very safe. When I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I would often ride over to New Dorp, Staten Island with my friends on our bicycles. It was on one of these occasions that I realized that the Outerbridge was not named the Outerbridge because it was the last one in order; but it was named after a man by the name of James Outerbridge. I perhaps never had that occasion to note that unless I had gone over on my bicycle. There was a factory also located at the upper end of Barron Avenue called **Gusmore's** and there were many pickup games of baseball played at Gusmore's Field. They had a large lawn there that they let neighborhood children use. We also played a lot of pickup games of basketball in the neighborhood. That was the basic recreation. When I was in high school I was involved actually in track and field. I was a mile runner in high school. I actually started when I was in eighth grade. I enjoyed that a lot.

Brenda Velasco: And you were right in the high school in eighth grade.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So you just moved up through the ranks.

Bruce Christensen: They had us practice with the varsity team although he couldn't technically compete in meets and by the time we were seniors we had a very strong team because we had a lot of runners that had started in the eighth grade.

Brenda Velasco: So you had quite a few years of running which would be to your advantage.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Very good.

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

Bruce Christensen: I would say that the focal point of the community was Woodbridge Main Street. Most people could come to the street and do their shopping. We had, of course, **Woolworth's**. When I was young we had several grocery stores. We had an **Acme** and an **A&P**. We had one or two meat stores. We had what was called a **Busy Bee Market**. There were several dry cleaning establishments, one or two fruit and vegetable stores, several jewelry stores and two or three pharmacies on the street.

Brenda Velasco: What were some of the pharmacies, do you recall?

Bruce Christensen: **Publix Pharmacy** was one. When **Publix Pharmacy** first started out they also had a soda fountain and people could come in. They probably had that for five or six years before that was discontinued. There were several luncheonettes also on the street. One of the luncheonettes was called **Shores**. I mentioned the hardware stores. There was **Main Hardware** and I believe another hardware store on the street as well.

Brenda Velasco: So this was a regular shopping area? You could get all your demands and supplies here.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And you mentioned **Christensen's**. Was **Choper's**.....

Bruce Christensen: **Choper's** was also in business. It was a general department store as well. There were also two other men's shops in the town, **Lehr's** and next to us, for a period of time, **Modern Men's**.

Brenda Velasco: So this was quite the place for shopping and everything.

Bruce Christensen: Yes, back in the '50s too it was very fashionable for high students to wear a class jacket or class sweater and, of course, both ourselves and **Modern Men's** would stock those and this brought a lot of people to town as well. Might I just interject something else in connection with Main Street? Some have heard of the Captain Carlsen Day parade (1951). I was probably about seven or eight years old and I still remember the day of the parade a number of us actually got up on the roof of our department store and were viewing the parade from a high vantage point.

Brenda Velasco: Very high.

Bruce Christensen: That was very unique. Another memory on Main Street was the Woodbridge train wreck (1951). Again I was seven or eight years old. I could remember that evening. The wreck occurred a little after six o'clock I believe it was, I may not have the exact time right, but I remember my father did not come home that night because during the war he had served on the First Aid Squad and he was helping out the first few days there with some of the victims. What I can remember is the sound of sirens all night

long and, of course, they were using acetylene torches to try to free some of the cars up and the whole sky over Main Street was lit up at that time.

Brenda Velasco: You have quite a good memory but then you're also a history teacher too.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

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

Bruce Christensen: The section of Woodbridge that I live in is a very established section of Woodbridge. It's called the Edgar Hill section. Some of the older houses in the township were located there. What I liked about it was that it was quiet and peaceful and it was a relatively safe section of the township.

Brenda Velasco: Perhaps you could elaborate about the Edgar Hill section how it became named the Edgar Hill section.

Bruce Christensen: Off of East Prospect Avenue, on a cross street between Prospect and Craske Street, there is a large house today; it's known as the **Edgar House**. The Edgars are one of the early families in the township. I understand that at one time the main driveway from the **Edgar House** actually extended all the way down to Rahway Avenue before any other houses were constructed. The house is still standing today. A couple of other old houses in the area was the **Tappen House** on the corner of Schoder Avenue and Ridgedale Avenue and I may point out that at one time Ridgedale Avenue was called Bloodgood Avenue. Another old house near there was the **Pfeiffer House** on the corner of Lockwood Avenue and Ridgedale. When my father was approximately six years old, he moved from Main Street to what was called the **Christensen House** on the corner of East Prospect and Ridgedale. I'm not sure how old the house is or how far back it is. I do know that my father had a deed for the property. I may still have it home somewhere, and I can recall, in a description of the deed and the search, there was mention made of a former owner and it stated that at the owner's death their slaves would be given their freedom. So the house went back, to at least, 1850.

Brenda Velasco: It predates the Civil War then.

Bruce Christensen: It predates the Civil War.

Brenda Velasco: That's like Bloomfield who liberated his slave on July 4th, I forgot the year, but there was this tendency. And you have a historical background, why do you think people such as that, in New Jersey, because slavery wasn't abolished until the Fifteenth Amendment. Why would people in Woodbridge.....

Bruce Christensen: I'm not sure how strong the abolitionist movement was in New Jersey but I know that it was strengthening in the North and the abolitionists were having a great deal of influence, at least in some areas of the northeast. But I can't put a finger on the situation in New Jersey.

Brenda Velasco: This is the second time I've heard with the liberation of slaves prior to the Fifteenth Amendment and it was just done voluntarily and we were a holdout for many years as far as the northern part. You always

hear about New England with the abolitionist movement. Just speculation here.

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

Brenda Velasco: Anything else that you can recall that's in question nine, any other significant happenings in Woodbridge that you can recall?

Bruce Christensen: I can remember when there was a prison riot at is now called the East Jersey Prison (November, 1971). That was quite significant. I can remember a period of time in the 1950s, although this didn't occur in Woodbridge itself, it did occur in a nearby community. There were approximately three airplane crashes in Elizabeth within a relative short period of time and I do remember that (December 1951 – February 1952).

Brenda Velasco: With that prison riot did that impact Woodbridge Proper at all because that's really located in Avenel?

Bruce Christensen: I don't think it did. I don't recall whether the police came around giving any warnings in the neighborhood. I don't remember anything specifically about that.

Brenda Velasco: Sporting events or discrimination, anything else on question nine?

Bruce Christensen: I don't think so.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Bruce Christensen: For one thing it's a very diverse community and I enjoy the diversity. A lot of people are attracted to the location because it's so close to New York City. To me I'm a country boy by nature so that's not a major attraction for me. But we are so close to many things, the Jersey Shore, we're close to the mountains and we're close to centers of transportation like airports. There are many, many things that are attractive to living in Woodbridge. I also feel that the school system is first rate not only because I teach in the system but I went through the system.

Brenda Velasco: You're a product of it.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And your children also are.

Bruce Christensen: My children are; I have grandchildren in the system. I had an uncle that taught history over forty years in Woodbridge High School; I had an aunt that taught in Woodbridge High School for a number of years and my mother, for a period of time, taught in Iselin. So I'm very committed to the Woodbridge School system.

Brenda Velasco: It's in your genes.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You can't do anything else but.

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

Bruce Christensen: I have a sister living in Woodbridge Proper, I have a brother living in the Colonia section and one of my daughters and her family also live in Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so we still have Christensens and we have descendants of the Dunham family still living here then which is good.

Bruce Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?

Bruce Christensen: I don't think there's anything in particular at this time. Of course there were so many unique things occurring in the township and it's just difficult to put your finger on.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes, and now that you're employed in the school system and you did a Woodbridge **Then and Now** with the students which was a great book to produce. So I'm looking forward to looking at it and sharing it with the rest of the Historic Preservation Commission which you just became a member of so; you're a great addition. But I thank you very much for the interview and finding the time in your busy schedule.

Bruce Christensen: You're certainly very welcome. It was a real pleasure to be here.

Brenda Velasco: And enjoy the rest of your summer.

Bruce Christensen: Thank you.