

Oral History Interview
Carl S. Christensen
WH100

(Written transcript and digital audio)

On March 1, 2012, Carl S. Christensen was interviewed by Brenda Velasco at the Henry Inman Library around 10:30 A.M.

Brenda Velasco: I'm at the Henry Inman Library with my 100th interviewee, Carl S. Christensen of Iselin. Carl has been with Fire District #9 (in Iselin) for many years and that's how I first met Carl. I know he has a wealth of information to share with the township for the oral history archives.

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

Carl S. Christensen: My name is Carl S. Christensen. I live in the Iselin section of Woodbridge. I was born November 19, 1939.

2. How long have you lived in Iselin?

Carl S. Christensen: I was three days in the hospital in Newark and have been in Iselin since except for my three years and two months active Navy.

Brenda Velasco: You do know your dates and I'm fairly aware of that. So basically your whole life you have been here except when you were in the Navy. That was a short hiatus.

Carl S. Christensen: And excepting for nine years I've lived in the same home.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and what house was that?

Carl S. Christensen: 190 Cooper Avenue, Iselin.

3. Why did you or your family move to the Iselin section of Woodbridge?

Brenda Velasco: Because you were born in Newark.

Carl S. Christensen: They were living in Iselin when I was conceived. My parents moved there in '35 or '36; that's when they came to town.

Brenda Velasco: Why did they come to Iselin? What appealed to them?

Carl S. Christensen: I have no idea, I never asked.

Brenda Velasco: Did they own their own house then?

Carl S. Christensen: They bought the house on Cooper Avenue. The lady that held the mortgage was from Carteret, I was told that. I do not recall what they paid for it but by today's prices it was probably ten thousand dollars, something like that.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of the homes were going for about that in this area or even less back then. Okay, so it wasn't the Star Eagle section of Iselin where they were giving out twenty foot lots with a subscription to the *Star Ledger*. They went right to Cooper Avenue.

Carl S. Christensen: They went right to Cooper Avenue. They might have chosen it because of the property; the size of the lot.

Brenda Velasco: How big was it?

Carl S. Christensen: It's actually five buildings lots. It's about a 150 X 150.

Brenda Velasco: Wow, that's large!

Carl S. Christensen: Right, but it's broken so the house is on three lots and there are two lots that are on a separate piece of property for tax purposes. My parents were in tune to that otherwise they'd be paying a lot more in taxes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so that was a nice piece of property. Alright, so you grew up living on Cooper Avenue basically then.

Carl S. Christensen: That is correct.

Brenda Velasco: Except for a short span in the same house, 190 Cooper Avenue. And that's the original house?

Carl S. Christensen: That's the original house.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Carl S. Christensen: But the other time I also lived in Iselin for thirteen months on Gill Lane in the apartments and then eight years or so on Benjamin Avenue so I haven't gotten very far.

Brenda Velasco: No you haven't, not at all.

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

Brenda Velasco: Because you could just talk about Cooper Avenue and Gill Lane with tremendous changes there as well as Oak Tree Road.

Carl S. Christensen: The first major changes that I recall was the creation of the housing developments, Chain O' Hills, when the Summer Brothers came in. From what I've been told that, at that time when they built those homes, the selling spiel was a house for under ten thousand dollars. The price was nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five cents.

Brenda Velasco: Say that again.

Carl S. Christensen: Nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-five ninety-nine.

Brenda Velasco: So it was under ten thousand.

Carl S. Christensen: Under ten thousand dollars.

Brenda Velasco: And where were those homes located?

Carl S. Christensen: They were on Green Street which is now between Chain O' Hills Road and Bloomfield Avenue and from Green Street back to Grant Place.

Brenda Velasco: So that was a big chunk of land. What year are we talking about?

Carl S. Christensen: You're talking now 1950/1951.

Brenda Velasco: So you were already in your teens by that time? What was that area prior to the Summer Brothers coming in?

Carl S. Christensen: Prior to that, from the brook all the way to Route 1, were basically fields and forests. There were some homes on Bloomfield going towards Newark and going towards New Brunswick but basically it was all greenery.

Brenda Velasco: So this was your big park area that you played in?

Carl S. Christensen: It wasn't a park.

Brenda Velasco: No, but this was your fields.

Carl S. Christensen: It was woods.

Brenda Velasco: It was better.

Carl S. Christensen: People could hunt. Many times, in fact, myself I did it over a period of years. I'd walk right down Green Street with my shotgun and go hunting.

We'd go fishing in the brook and swimming in the brook. It was even so good in those days I was drinking the water which I wouldn't do today.

Brenda Velasco: So this whole thing after World War II, because it was 1950 after World War II.....

Carl S. Christensen: That was just the beginning. The next project that came along was Westbury Park. That again was from Green Street going towards Newark up to Bird Avenue. In the interim, Woodbridge Oaks started which was the other side.....oh, I'm going to throw a curve right after this, they started Woodbridge Oaks and then they did Woodbridge Oaks North. Then they covered the area from Oak Tree Road to New Dover Road.

Brenda Velasco: Woodbridge Oaks North?

Carl S. Christensen: Woodbridge Oaks and then Woodbridge Oaks North.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Oak Tree Road to Wood Avenue. So prior to this, and we're dealing with the 1950s, this was all fields then?

Carl S. Christensen: It was all that, right. It was in the '50s when those homes were all built. When the Summer Brothers came back into town, after doing projects in Edison, they did Menlo Park Terrace. But here's a curve I'm going to throw you right in the middle, my very first airplane ride was from the Iselin airport.

Brenda Velasco: Do you have any tickets or anything?

Carl S. Christensen: No I don't. It was in a piper cub and the airport is where the **Indus American Bank** is on Oak Tree Road.

Brenda Velasco: Where the old **ShopRite** used to be?

Carl S Christensen: Where the old, old **ShopRite** was. There were two **ShopRites** there.

Brenda Velasco: Wow, so you have seen Iselin radically change with the construction after World War II and with the advent of the Parkway because the Parkway.....

Carl S. Christensen: Was in 1949/1950 and when the Parkway came through at that time we started using the pond by **BASF** which used to be **General Chemicals** opposite the train station. We used to swim in there.

Brenda Velasco: Wow, you have seen Iselin totally change.

Carl S. Christensen: That's where I learned to swim. I used to mouth off to the big guys and they got fed up with me. One day they threw me in and said start swimming and I learned to swim.

Brenda Velasco: I'm sure mouthing off to the big guys was so in character with you, Carl Christensen. So you really saw Iselin more than double in size and this is after World War II, one for the growth of suburbia, the growth of the highway network and the Parkway because the exit was right on Route 27.

Carl S. Christensen: Then you also had the housing developments up on Benjamin Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Do you know when they came?

Carl S. Christensen: They also had the Winding Road area.

Brenda Velasco: Right, that's another one. That was later, right?

Carl S. Christensen: That was later, yes. You had Kiva Street and in between there were a lot of other houses built; we had a major influx of people. At one point, and I don't recall the year, when they had the Hungarian Revolution.....

Brenda Velasco: 1956.

Carl S. Christensen: A lot of Polish people or Hungarian people came into the area and I can remember people saying, what are them Hungarians coming in for, oh no. Well, little by little they just disappeared and they blended right in and you didn't even know they were there.

Brenda Velasco: And they came with a hard work ethic.

Carl S. Christensen: Absolutely.

Brenda Velasco: And that wasn't the only part of the whole township of Woodbridge that they settled in but I was surprised to hear in Iselin as well. Okay, so going back to when you were growing up you gave us the growth of all the developments, how about the services?

Carl S. Christensen: Have you seen the twelve minute episode that's on *YouTube* about the history of Iselin?

Brenda Velasco: No, I haven't seen that.

Carl S. Christensen: Well, it's on *YouTube*. Look for *Iselin-My Iselin*. It's 1937 and the reason I know it was '37 because I watched it and I picked out the name of the movie off the marquee and I went looking on the internet and picked it up.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and that gets us to the fact that Iselin had a movie house.

Carl S. Christensen: Absolutely, on the corner of Correja Avenue and Oak Tree Road.

Brenda Velasco: What was the name of it do you remember?

Carl S. Christensen: It was the **Iselin Theatre** and that's one of the things, when we were younger, on Saturday afternoons for twenty-five cents we'd go up and get a double feature and the cartoons.

Brenda Velasco: And sometimes the newsreel.

Carl S. Christensen: And the newsreel. We'd go there at night for different movies and I don't want to tell you the shenanigans that we did.

Brenda Velasco: No, I don't want to hear your shenanigans.

Carl S. Christensen: I didn't do it, I was a good boy.

Brenda Velasco: We're not going to go into this. Okay, so what were the other stories that you had on Oak Tree Road?

Carl S. Christensen: On the corner of Marconi and Oak Tree was **Petroletti's Drug Store**. He was the original first aid squad in town. When you got a cut or scrapped knee or something you needed help you'd go there and Mr. and Mrs. Petroletti will patch you up. They had the old fashioned soda fountain that was there with the stools and the soda dispensers. Diagonally across Oak Tree Road from there was an **A&P**. The manager's name was Cosgrove. Across the street from **Petroletti's**, the opposite corner of Marconi, was **Quigley's Esso Gas Station**, that was before **Exxon**. Next to that was the **College Town Food Market**. That was the first food market from what I was told in the country that used shopping baskets. Going a little bit further up Oak Tree was **Hank's Tavern**. A little bit beyond that was **Heiber's Bakery**.

Brenda Velasco: So you had a bakery too.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, it was well known in the area. You'd see all New York plates coming in for breads and that on Saturdays. They had good pastries and cakes also. A little bit beyond that, in later years, **Bell Drugs** came in. The house next to that a family by the name of Dobbs lived and a little bit past that there was a house

that was set well in off Oak Tree Road which was the original library in Iselin: the free library of Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: Who established that?

Carl S. Christensen: The people of Iselin established that. They used to sell shares so people could become members of it and I know it for a fact because I used to go and sell shares.

Brenda Velasco: Do you have any copies of those shares?

Carl S. Christensen: No, I do not. One of my steady customers was Mrs. Schofi and she lived on the corner of Holmes, Park and Green, a little house that sits up on the corner. Going back to Oak Tree Road, right after the library, was a dentist called Yegendorf. We called him yank him out because that was before the days of fillings and that's where I lost a lot of my teeth. Then on the corner was the hardware store.

Brenda Velasco: **Eagle?**

Carl S. Christensen: Before **Eagle, Iselin Hardware.**

Brenda Velasco: But it was called **Iselin** before it became **Eagle** because **Eagle** was very popular.

Carl S. Christensen: And later on the guy that owned **Eagle** blamed the township for not fixing up Oak Tree Road that his business failed. This is my personal opinion, he failed to realize that at the time Oak Tree Road was starting to fail because Menlo Park Shopping Center came in in the early '60s and that pulled the people away because they had a greater variety.

Brenda Velasco: And you also had **Two Guys** opening up on Route 9.

Carl S. Christensen: Route 9 north where **Walmart** is now.

Brenda Velasco: So once again the small mom and pop stores were being hurt by the larger competition which had been happening since the 19th century unfortunately. But **Eagle** was very.....because from Colonia we would go to **Eagle**. It was just very, very popular.

Carl S. Christensen: Correct and the other corner of Correja was the movie house. Beyond the movie house and I don't remember specifically what orientation, but at one time the post office was on Correja Avenue and at one time the post office was on Oak Tree Road the area opposite the college town. **Heiber** was also on the corner of Correja and Oak Tree and then going beyond the movie house, that building which was the travel agency that was also a post office.

Brenda Velasco: So you had a traveling post office; it just moved around. How about houses of worship?

Carl S. Christensen: Going back on the other side of Oak Tree Road, in from the corner of Middlesex and Oak Tree, Harry Klein had its original stationery store. Then later on he built a larger stationery store which was on the corner of Middlesex and Oak Tree and the house that had been there was relocated to Berkeley Boulevard between Elmhurst and Benjamin Avenue. Going across Middlesex, in a little bit, you had the **Delfino Coal and Oil Company**. Then you had **Jimmies' Shoe Repair**. You could go into **Jimmies'** at any time and you smelled the leather, the old oil, listen to his canaries and he always had Italian music on the radio. He had a garden along the side of his place in the summertime and he'd grow stuff. He had the heavy Italian accent and was always a pleasure to deal with. A little beyond that was a house and next to that was the First Presbyterian I believe in 1937.

Brenda Velasco: During the Depression.

Carl S. Christensen: Right, that's correct. Then in the late '40s they put an addition on. When you look at the church on Oak Tree Road you can see the double door and to the left was the addition. Across the street from that was St. Cecilia's. You had a white church and then the sanctuary that they had for a long time was an old structure from the Civil War hospital that had been off New Dover Road and was moved down to there. That would have been in the.....I guess it might have been considered the Colonia section.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, where the old World War I hospital was.

Carl S. Christensen: World War I hospital, not Civil War, World War I.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, that's where it was off Midwood in through there.

Carl S. Christensen: And that hospital, being of federal structure, also had their own fire department there and they had all the (inaudible) pumping.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Carl S. Christensen: Am I giving you anything you haven't heard before?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, sometimes you are.

Carl S. Christensen: Good.

Brenda Velasco: I didn't realize they had their own fire department because it was a federal structure.

Carl S. Christensen: It was federal in there, yes. There are some pictures of that; I've seen pictures of it. (John Miele author of **Then and Now of Iselin**)

Brenda Velasco: I'm not sure because his book is a wealth of information.

Carl S. Christensen: They had a CYO which used to meet in the Quonset hut which was built right on Oak Tree Road. The church entrance faced Middlesex Avenue and there was a rectory there. That was a structure I'm not sure whose home that was at one time. Then they built the school, they had the church inside the school, and then they built the school that you have now.

Brenda Velasco: Which is closing.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, it was in the paper the other day. Going down to Cooper Avenue the houses of worship, down the far end of Cooper Avenue, there was a synagogue. After that closed it became the Faith Fellowship Ministries. When they departed from there they went up to Oak Tree Road in Edison and now they're located down in Sayreville by the sewage treatment plant. Further up Green Street on Montague, there's a church there and I'm not sure of the name of it but it's basically black families who attend the church. You don't even know it's there but it's there.

Brenda Velasco: I know I've been there

Carl S. Christensen: On the other side of Montague, on the corner of Montague and Edwards, you've got the Jehovah Witness.

Brenda Velasco: So you've got a lot of houses of worship because you also had the synagogue as well.

Carl S. Christensen: I don't believe there were any others.

Brenda Velasco: No, I think you covered quite extensively. Alright, so how about the schools?

Carl S. Christensen: We had School No. 6 which was located on Green Street next to the firehouse which is now **Provident Bank**. You had School No. 15 up on Pershing Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Which is no longer there.

Carl S. Christensen: Right, it's all homes there. In the early '60s Iselin Middle School (1960) was built and I believe the end of the '60s JFK was built (1964).

Brenda Velasco: Yes, '64 or '67 in that area.

Carl S. Christensen: In between you had School No. 18 (1956) that came in, School No. 19 in the terrace (1957), School No. 22 (1959) and I believe School No. 24 (1960). Don't ask me the years. All I know is they popped up.

Brenda Velasco: That was because of the big growth in population. You were exploding.

Carl S. Christensen: Huge explosion of population. In 1957, when I graduated high school, I was the first graduating class out of the new Woodbridge High; prior to that I spent my first six years of school at School No. 6. The next two years I spent in Keasbey.

Brenda Velasco: So you were bused to Keasbey then?

Carl S. Christensen: Right. The furthest I ever walked to school was from my house to the corner of Ridgeley and Green. That's where I caught the bus to go to Keasbey and Barron Avenue High School which was your original Woodbridge High School.

Brenda Velasco: So you did attend the original high school for a short number.

Carl S. Christensen: Three years on split session and then the new high school.

Brenda Velasco: You weren't on split session for that last year in high school then, 1957?

Carl S. Christensen: All I know is I went there and graduated there and then I went to the Navy in September of '57. I went in on what they called the minority cruise or kiddy cruise in at 17 and out before you turn 21.

Brenda Velasco: You were young.

5. What public buildings/property were there? Post office, library, parks, firehouse, schools, etc.?

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so we've covered the schools, we covered the post office, you're traveling post office because that went.....

Carl S. Christensen: Right and then the post office went down to Middlesex where it still is. Going back to the physical changes in the area, let's drop back to that, I should have stayed there a little bit longer. Our yard used to be part of **Cooper's Farm. Costello/Runyon Funeral Parlor** residence now was the barn for **Cooper's Farm**. My first recollection of that building structure was it was a four family apartment house and in the mid '50s it became **Costello's Funeral Home**.

Brenda Velasco: So it went from a barn.....

Carl S. Christensen: To an apartment house.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, four family and then it became a funeral parlor.

Carl S. Christensen: Correct and just FYI in the same year that the *Andrea Doria* was sunk by the Stockholm is when Tom Costello's first wife, Rita, passed away in a fire (1956).....Oh, and then there was one more church too, it just came back to me, it burst into fire in that building. The other church that I came back to was the Assembly of God Church which was located on the corner of Cooper and Berkeley Boulevard. At one time the minister was Mrs. Klein.

Brenda Velasco: Mrs. Klein from the store? No, separate.

Carl S. Christensen: Harry Klein. I believe he was of the Jewish faith. This was Mrs. Klein. Her and my father didn't get along.

Brenda Velasco: And that was quite near your house.

Carl S. Christensen: Right down the corner. In fact, when you face the church that's there, the two split levels to the right, she owned those lots. My mother and father owned **Costello's Funeral Parlor's** parking lot and they owned the lot where **Country Farms** is; it used to be **Cumberland Farms**. Their plan was to eventually buy all in between and they wanted to put up an apartment house so once Walt Lamiska bought the lot that was right next to **Costello's** parking lot that shot those plans down. But when Tommy had the apartment house he needed parking so Tommy approached my father to sell the lot. My dad said to Tom I'll tell you what, you get me those two lots around the corner from Mrs. Klein and this is yours. Now Tommy couldn't go do it so what Tommy did was he went to his first wife's father which was Kenny Van Pelt, who was a police sergeant. And Kenny went and bought the two lots from Mrs. Klein.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, because she didn't get along with your father so that's how you got it then, very clever.

Carl S. Christensen: And at one time my father and a lot of business people in Iselin wanted to create a bank, **First Bank of Iselin**. Because of politics they couldn't get it. That's when **Woodbridge Bank** was formed.

Brenda Velasco: Because I know Colonia had a **First Bank of Colonia**.

Carl S. Christensen: Correct, that was later on.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, that was in the '60s.

Carl S. Christensen: One of the principals of the **Woodbridge Bank** was a guy by the name of Buttonback. My father, when he moved here from Newark, went to get a loan. He went to the bank and what he took as a credit reference was he took his checkbook, all his bills and his cancelled checks. When he went there he showed the bills and the cancelled checks and it showed that he took two percent net ten. He wanted to borrow like twenty-five hundred and the guy said with your credit rating you might as well borrow five thousand. In those days that was a lot of money.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, it was.

Carl S. Christensen: That was his credit reference and references like that still work today without writing. I go to the Presbyterian Church and they're going to be fixing up Fellowship Hall. They're going to be redoing the heat so being a plumber by trade I went to the supply house to get the price on heating elements to redo the heat and neaten it up. One supply house didn't have the particular line of heat that I want to manufacture so they referred me to another one which is Atlantic which used to be **Westfield Plumbing** up on North Avenue. I opened up an account in one hour. My credit references from Bird, Tool and Aaron was taken by two percent net ten so it still works today.

Brenda Velasco: Let's get back to Question 5, the firehouse. When does it become such an important part of your life?

Carl S. Christensen: Well, first let's go back to the firehouse. That was originally a church.

Brenda Velasco: We're talking about the firehouse on Green Street?

Carl S. Christensen: It was originally a church.

Brenda Velasco: I didn't know that.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, I didn't bring that little tidbit with me. You saw this right?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, I have it home. (Then and Now of Iselin)

Carl S. Christensen: Okay, I think it had mention of that in there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Carl S. Christensen: Going back to the history of the fire companies in the township or whatever you want, if you want that little tidbit, District 1.....

Brenda Velasco: That's Woodbridge.

Carl S. Christensen: District 2 is Port Reading. District 3 was Carteret and Carteret was a fire district before it seceded from the township.

Brenda Velasco: It's on its own now. I don't want to hear about that.

Carl S. Christensen: But that was District 3. District 4 is Keasbey. District 5 is Avenel. District 6 was originally all of Iselin and Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: Because so much of it was farmland and fields.

Carl S. Christensen: But then, because of the railroad and the long freights going through, District 6 was abolished. They created District 9 which is still there today. District 10 is a paper district, that's for all the public utility right of ways. That's all taken and divided equally amongst all the districts in the township. District 11 was formed and this was in '24.

Brenda Velasco: 1924?

Carl S. Christensen: Correct and late '40s or early '50s is when Colonia was formed, that was District 12.

Brenda Velasco: We were the last, really, to be developed. Okay, so getting back to District #9 when you were formed.....

Carl S. Christensen: When was it part of my life? When the siren used to go off I used to go down and sit on the hill and watch the fire trucks go and come so I'll say six or seven years old.

Brenda Velasco: Was your dad part of the fire.....

Carl S. Christensen: No, my father was not.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so this was something that just was innate in you that you've always wanted to do because you're still doing it.

Carl S. Christensen: Well it gets even better yet. As I got older, when the fire company used to have the fairs every year, they used to have carnivals as fundraisers and they used to have the wheels and the stands and the ball tosses. I used to go down and help the firemen assemble the stuff for the fairs or for the carnival and hang around the firehouse. On Memorial Day I used to go to the parades as a Boy Scout and have birch beer and participate. I couldn't respond to calls because at that time you had to be twenty-one.

Brenda Velasco: Right, now we have an explorer's program.

Carl S. Christensen: But when I turned seventeen, when the horn would go off, I would head to the firehouse and a member of the fire company at the time, Johnny Niedraka, would throw me the keys to his pickup truck. I would follow the fire truck to the scene, brushfires, help him put the fire out, wrap the hose up, drive back to the firehouse and put everything back together again. But in between, I also joined the Iselin First Aid Squad as one of the first four First Aid cadets in the township.

Brenda Velasco: And where was that held, the First Aid squad?

Carl S. Christensen: The original building was next to what is the **Gulf Gas Station** on 27. I think I was fourteen or sixteen at the time when I joined but I was one of the first four. I stayed with the First Aid squad until I went in the Navy. I came out of the Navy in November of 1960 and in March of 1961 I was sworn into the fire company.

Brenda Velasco: It's just in you.

Carl S. Christensen: Sunday I will start my fifty-second year.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! Okay, and when you got married your wife had to accept it.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes. The first night I met her I decided I was going to marry her. In June, we'll have forty-six years.

Brenda Velasco: Congratulations, not many people can boast about that! Anything else you want to mention about in Question 5? Oh, okay why do we have so many fire districts in Iselin, Carl?

Carl S. Christensen: Well, at the time when the township was growing and people had their areas they wanted, and this is still true today up and down the state and the state.....this is hitting a sore spot right now, politics are kicking in and I don't like the air that's down in Trenton. They're pushing consolidated services and everything.

Brenda Velasco: But we have four firehouses in Iselin but why did that come about, that's what I want to know?

Carl S. Christensen: District 9 started on Green Street where the majority of the people were at the time (1922). District 11 started on Harding Avenue because of the railroad (1924). Apparatus couldn't get back and forth across the railroad tracks. Of course that was before the underpass.

Brenda Velasco: It was a grade crossing and sometimes the trains were about a hundred and fifty cars long.

Carl S. Christensen: And they were steam and believe it or not, you might find it hard to believe, but coming out of Metuchen all the way to Iselin is a grade rising and the old steam used to take time to get them up.

Brenda Velasco: But for District 9 this was located right where the people lived.

Carl S. Christensen: Right, and then later on as things developed and when Menlo Park Terrace came up and the people there, because of several fires, needed protection down there. We had members there and the members coming from there used to have a long haul to get to the firehouse.

Brenda Velasco: Because you had traffic on Route 27 or Route 1.

Carl S. Christensen: Or coming back out of Isabelle Street coming the back way by the **Old Soldier's Home** that used to take a lot longer. Then by the time we got to the firehouse, to the Terrace, it was also a long length. That's why House 2 was developed for District 9. House 2, which they call it now, it used to be called the substation for 11. They created that building because they had a lot of members that lived up on that far end of Woodbridge Oak North and instead of them coming all the way down to Auth Avenue and going right back up again they created the second building and put an engine up there.

Brenda Velasco: And that's on New Dover Road?

Carl S. Christensen: Between Broad and Semel Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: So the substations were formed because of the demographic changes.

Carl S. Christensen: That's correct.

Brenda Velasco: And traffic conditions delayed time.

Carl S. Christensen: Absolutely. During Christmas season in Fire District 9, the guys would sit from after Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve in the evening down in **Seymor's Trading Post** which was the old junkyard the old Army surplus depot on the corner of Menlo and Route 1, do you remember that?

Brenda Velasco: No that I don't.

Carl S. Christensen: Do you know where that grocery store is down there?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Carl S. Christensen: Okay, well if you walked across the street where **Pollo Tropical** is now and **Bennigan's** that used to be all old vehicles; he used to sell Army surplus vehicles. We used to sit in there in a cold garage, four guys sitting with an engine, in case of a fire in Menlo Park Terrace. I remember spending many a cold night down there.

Brenda Velasco: And that was the season for fires. I mean you have fires occurring.....

Carl S. Christensen: It wasn't because of traffic on Route 1.

Brenda Velasco: Right, with the mall too that was.....

Carl S. Christensen: The mall, Woodbridge Center.

Brenda Velasco: And you really have to be dedicated as a fireman.

Carl S. Christensen: And our firehouse was and still is all volunteer, the same as 11, all volunteer. Yes, many people say why do we need multiple fire districts? Well, we had the volunteer houses and the taxes are a little bit cheaper. I'm not knocking District 1 but they've got a large career department and that puts their tax rate as far as fire a little bit higher than Districts 9, 11, 5, 4.....

Brenda Velasco: And District 12.

Carl S. Christensen: District 12 and 7 and 8. Oh, not 7, 7 has career between 4 P.M. and 8 P.M.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's get down to Question 6, that's recreation. We touched on it a while back.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Carl S. Christensen: What did we do for recreation?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, as you were growing up.

Carl S. Christensen: I wasn't part of the gangs but I tried Little League baseball.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so you did have Little League then.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, we did. It started down in Cooper's Field. I remember when the township came down and took two feet of topsoil out and left this hard pan but we still played baseball there. We used to fish in the brook.

Brenda Velasco: All of this is close to your house.

Carl S. Christensen: We didn't go far. For the kids that went to St. Cecelia's, they had a CYO. We would have, within the Presbyterian Church, I can't think of the name of it, but we used to go there on Sunday nights for a little bit of devotion and then some recreation. We used to hunt and ride our bicycles. In the summertime, we

would disappear and you wouldn't see us from morning until night. We would take day excursions like ride our bikes from Iselin to Roosevelt Park.

Brenda Velasco: And Roosevelt Park had a lot of gullies and everything for you.

Carl S. Christensen: We used to go up to the copper mines and play. The copper mines are up on Wood Avenue where they just tore **Marshalls** down, in that area. It was a copper mine at one time back to the colonial days.

Brenda Velasco: So there was a lot for you to do without TV and without computers. You were busy all the time.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, we were or just playing in the yard with toys making our own little highways. We used to play sandlot baseball across the street from the house where they had the St. Cecelia's fair. That was the second place. The first place they had the fair was up where they had it the last couple of years. They moved down to Cooper Avenue and then they went back to where they were; they sold the property. That lot was also part of **Cooper's Farm**. At one time the convent that was there was the old farm house for **Cooper's Farm**. The old railroad station used to be located on the corner of Berkeley Boulevard and Middlesex/Essex Turnpike.

Brenda Velasco: I remember that: lots changed.

7. What was the focal point of your community?

Carl S. Christensen: One of the focal points, believe it or not, for me was the firehouse. That was for a lot of towns, a lot of small towns, across the state, not just Iselin. Don't forget we had two cemeteries in town in Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, we forgot about them.

Carl S. Christensen: Mount Lebanon, which is still there, and I'm trying to remember the other cemetery that was located where the **Renaissance** is now.

Brenda Velasco: It must have been very old because if the **Renaissance** is there.....

Carl S. Christensen: Well, all those people were reinterred up in the area by Mount Lebanon Cemetery. We had a trucking company up on Route 1 by the name of **Matlack**. When the **Sheraton** came, that's when they moved the bodies. The one of the larger stores that came in was the **McCrorry** complex or **S. Klein's**. It was known as the **McCrorry** complex.

Brenda Velasco: And that all fell under Iselin Fire District 9?

Carl S. Christensen: That is correct. One of the earlier arson fires I responded to was in the old **S. Klein's** in the basement. That was, I would say, '62.

Brenda Velasco: So you had just returned from the Navy then.

Carl S. Christensen: I was already one year in the fire company when that fire occurred.

Brenda Velasco: And that was arson?

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, one of the guards that was there. Fortunately the building had a sprinkler.

Brenda Velasco: Good thing.

Carl S. Christensen: We used to hunt and fish. We used to swim in the brook, like I said. We used to go skinny dipping in February. We'd build a fire, hit the water, come out, warm up and dress.

Brenda Velasco: And that's off Gill Lane somewhere?

Carl S. Christensen: Well no, we used to go to Cooper Avenue and go down into the woods there. The brook actually started becoming polluted when Edison Township started having problems with their sewer system.

Brenda Velasco: We're downstream they're upstream so we've had a lot of problems with.....

Carl S. Christensen: Oh, yes. In fact, they used to have an open discharge line when the sewer backed up into the brook. It had a check valve so when the brook got high it wouldn't flow back into the sewer system but the sewer system, when it got high, could dump into the brook. What finally brought it to a head was when they got that check valve sealed, they still had opened manhole covers that would pop, Scouts went and took large oil cans out and put them on top of the manhole covers and loaded them with rocks. That forced them to backup and forced Edison to correct it.

Brenda Velasco: So that was the Boy Scouts.

Carl S. Christensen: Boy did that cause a stink.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, I'm sure it did.

Carl S. Christensen: But the Scouts did their job. You might find that in the paper.

Brenda Velasco: No, you won't find that in the paper. Edison was upstream and I know we have a problem with Sucker Brook (South Branch of the Rahway River) because of.....

Carl S. Christensen: Well that pretty well covers recreation and later on when we were in school they used to have school dances. So the focal point was the firehouse but then over the years an Alliance Club formed in Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: What was that, the Alliance Club?

Carl S. Christensen: The Alliance Club, their thing is sight; glasses for the needy. My father happened to be charter president. At first they used to meet in the Green Street firehouse then later they moved to the Presbyterian Church and my mother used to cook for them for their meetings. They used to have two meetings a month, dinner meetings.

Brenda Velasco: That's why the garden at Iselin Library is the Garden for the Blind. So it all ties in.

Carl S. Christensen: And that's in that book of a picture of Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: So your family was instrumental with that. When did it start that Iselin Alliance?

Carl S. Christensen: It was in the '50s.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Carl S. Christensen: Then my mother was the charter president of the HSA at School 6. Then when all the kids started going to Keasbey the HSA started moving down there. Mrs. Wittenberg, who was old school, said it would never work; it's not going to work. Well, she never met my mother before. My mother turned her around and showed things that could happen. She took care of what had to be.

Brenda Velasco: So your parents were involved in the community.

Carl S. Christensen: They were involved in the community. My father was not involved as far as the fire company or anything else.

Brenda Velasco: No, it was a different aspect.

Carl S. Christensen: Right, but the Alliance Club used to have a paper drive once a month. The kids in town used to help on the paper drive and our payment was a

sundae (ice cream) at the old **Goose & Gander** up on Oak Tree Road. As I'm talking some of these things are coming back.

Brenda Velasco: What was the **Goose & Gander**?

Carl S. Christensen: It was a soda shop. They had a room in the back and I can remember Judge Tomasso playing cards in there with the other cronies from town.

Brenda Velasco: This was in Iselin or Edison?

Carl S. Christensen: Iselin. You remember when **Mackie & Reeves** was there, the upholstery shop?

Brenda Velasco: No.

Carl S. Christensen: Well, that was across from Quigley's **Esso**. After it was the **A&P**, it became **Mackie & Reeves**. There was a driveway between the two. If you took a left at **Mackie & Reeves**, that was where the **Goose & Gander** was. They had a room in the back and I remember seeing card games there.

Brenda Velasco: And you weren't allowed to participate.

Carl S. Christensen: I was young at the time. You do remember things.

Brenda Velasco: Oh yes, that stands out in your mind.

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

Carl S. Christensen: Growing up there. I just became accustomed to it, but today I prefer to stay here.

Brenda Velasco: You're making a choice to stay here.

Carl S. Christensen: I have a choice. We own a home in Pennsylvania and we could go there but I had an incident a couple of years ago and I needed an ambulance. It was twenty minutes before it got there and it was a three quarters of an hour ride to the hospital.

Brenda Velasco: This was in Pennsylvania?

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, Pennsylvania. So where I'm at now I can walk to the firehouse, to my bank, to my doctor and to my pharmacy. If I want to change I can walk to a dentist, I can walk to two convenience stores, to the post office, Social Security office and walk to the train station and go anyplace in the world. In fact, I've walked to the train station, took the train to Newark Airport, went to Europe, came home and reversed my steps.

Brenda Velasco: Location is everything.

Carl S. Christensen: Plus I can walk to church. I'm within minutes of the Parkway, the Turnpike and 287; to me, that's my hub. I have my friends here and I'm established here.

Brenda Velasco: We know you.

Carl S. Christensen: I say my peace.

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

Brenda Velasco: We mentioned the developments and how they mushroomed in Iselin and what impact.

Carl S. Christensen: Start with discrimination, no, but I can remember talking to a gentleman by the name of Al Spence. He was a man of color that lived off Green Street alongside Route 1. There were actually two colored sections in town-Hyde

Avenue South there were two families there but there were a larger grouping up on Quality Way (Iselin).

Brenda Velasco: I think Kyle Anderson came from the Hyde Avenue South section: our Councilman.

Carl S. Christensen: That was Kyle from there but I'm talking up over where **Dunkin Donuts**, where Spevack is around there. Al Spence, in his own words, they were living there and had a little group: he said a bunch of rowdies came in from Perth Amboy and they had a party. The people of the neighborhood visited them on Monday and told them either you shape up or you're going to get burned out and you'll be gone. They didn't want any troubles so they had their own little neighborhood and it was fantastic. We never had a problem up there you know where other places were having their problems with discrimination. Riots: no. Sport events, you had the high school and you had baseball but I don't recall anything of significance as far as anything bad with sports events. At one time, over in the Woodbridge section by where the old **Log Cabin** used to be, they had a dirt race track for quarter midgets. Accidents, we had quite a few of them. At one time several people got killed on the railroad by trying to cross it during a 4th of July fireworks celebration.

Brenda Velasco: That was by Merrill Park. There were no barriers; there was no fence (for the railroad tracks).

Carl S. Christensen: That was, I believe, '63. That's when Roger Stewart, who has forty-eight years in the fire company, that was his first call that he responded to, was picking up body parts. There were many traffic accidents on Route 1 and Green Street, the old circle. Speed was involved in the switch and the twist in the road which would lay a lot of semis over in the old **Sunoco**. The **Sunoco Station** was in the general area where the **Dunkin Donuts** is now.

Brenda Velasco: And that's right off of Route 1.

Carl S. Christensen: That circle was bad.

Brenda Velasco: And it's just within the past eight years or so that's it's been rerouted and made safer.

Carl S. Christensen: The worst thing we've had since then was unfortunately when the police officer from Perth Amboy, Raji, got killed but that was a drinking situation. There were other accidents where people died, you know, where cars caught fire and that. One 4th of July, on Route 1 just north of the Parkway, within a couple of days we had people that were killed; cars coming across the divider which didn't have a guardrail in between. The state came along and said there hadn't been enough fatalities there to warrant putting guardrails in and we had a couple of more (accidents). All of a sudden we had guardrails. Unfortunately, it took stuff like that to.....

Brenda Velasco: Always, it's not just where you are it's you have to have the fatalities.

Carl S. Christensen: Oh, absolutely.

Brenda Velasco: We're not going to talk about this anymore because then we can get angry.

Carl S. Christensen: No, I know. We can talk about that afterwards.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge/Iselin today?

Carl S. Christensen: I'm happy with what I have. Things have changed. I like what the government is trying to do. They're trying to hold taxes by doing different things and what they've done with the garbage pickup is made it a lot better. It started with one change and then made other changes and its better.

Brenda Velasco: Totally reorganized.

Carl S. Christensen: Oh yeah, I know. I like it and it wasn't done by laying people off, it was done by attrition. I had that discussion with the mayor on that several years ago and I said I like what you're doing. I like dealing with the fire service today. I have a lot of interaction with the other fire districts being involved.

Brenda Velasco: Because you're on the Board of Commissioners.

Carl S. Christensen: That plus my position within.....I can fill up a sheet of what I'm involved with as far as fire service and if you want I'll give you that.

11. Do you have any family members still living in Woodbridge/Iselin today?

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, I do have family members still living in Iselin today. My daughter lives in Woodbridge Oaks. She lives there with her husband and three children.

Brenda Velasco: So you have grandchildren that also keep you here.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Most important.

Carl S. Christensen: Absolutely. She works for the county; she's a special ed teacher. Her husband owns a landscaping business. He has a few customers in Iselin but he's basically in the Westfield/Scotch Plains area. I intend to stay here; they're going to have to take me out in a pine box.

Brenda Velasco: I hope not soon.

Carl S. Christensen: I hope not either.

Brenda Velasco: You've got too much energy.

Carl S. Christensen: I love to aggravate people.

Brenda Velasco: I know that. Do you have any other family members that live in Iselin besides your daughter, your grandchildren and your son-in-law?

Carl S. Christensen: No.

12. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss that we haven't covered that pertains to Woodbridge/Iselin?

Carl S. Christensen: Well I mentioned the airplane ride.

Brenda Velasco: Where exactly was that located? Oh, we did mention that. That was the old **ShopRite** and the Parkway cut through there, that whole area so once again.....

Carl S. Christensen: Up there you had two **ShopRites** and it moved further up Oak Tree Road. I remember hearing of the first fire at **Cooper's Dairy** and then the second fire occurred in '66. That's when the dairy went away.

Brenda Velasco: That was a second fire then.

Carl S. Christensen: Right and that was in '66; that happened in July. I got married in June of '66. We went on our honeymoon and we were gone for seven weeks. We went as far west as California and as far north as Yellowstone National Park. We then came back east.

Brenda Velasco: Did you miss the fire then?

Carl S. Christensen: No, I'm getting to it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Carl S. Christensen: The day I got back was the day I found out that my father had passed away in Denmark. While I was talking to my mother on the phone, a fire call came in for a house fire at 825 Ford Avenue in Menlo Park Terrace. I hung up and responded to the fire call. The next night, St. Cecelia's Fair was on at the same time, I went to Westfield to see my in-laws and coming off the Parkway was when I saw the second fire at **Cooper's**. Oh, one of the other things for recreation was we used to go over to **Cooper's Dairy** and visit the barns. There was a gentleman there by the name of John Kalinch, aka Skates. He used to go up and get us some chocolate milk; we used to get treats. We used to watch him milk the cows before the udder machines. He would squirt the milk at the kittens and at us.

Brenda Velasco: You had a ball.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes, we found things to do without getting in trouble.

Brenda Velasco: There was a lot to do.

Carl S. Christensen: Absolutely. **Cooper's Dairy** used to have his own pasteurizing process. He had two pastures, one foot on each side of Middlesex/Essex Turnpike, and at one time it used to go all the way to Wood Avenue. When the Parkway went through, that's when it was divided. That's when that pond was built by old **Mineral Chemicals** where we used to swim. In fact when you looked at the pond it was a circle. One quarter they built in with sand and that's where we used to basically swim. The rest was all muck. We used to catch catfish, net them up in Roosevelt Park, bring them down and put them in the pond. At different times we used to go there at night with the lantern and fish for catfish and just sit there until ten or eleven or twelve o'clock at night and go home without getting in trouble. Swimming in the old pond we used to change clothes in the graders that they were using to grade the Parkway when it was two lanes north and two lanes south.

Brenda Velasco: And we also have to remember that they didn't have barriers (fences) along the Parkway either then.

Carl S. Christensen: I know there wasn't.

Brenda Velasco: There were no barriers in Colonia or in Iselin. You could just walk across which was dangerous, too.

Carl S. Christensen: That's when it was 50 miles an hour speed limit. In the wintertime, the fire company used to flood the lots on Elmhurst and Berkeley Boulevard. It used to create ice skating rinks for kids. The kids used to collect old Christmas trees and pile them up and the fire company would supervise the lighting and the burning of the Christmas trees. That used to be one bodacious bonfire.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we've covered a lot.

Carl S. Christensen: I'm trying to think of some more.

Brenda Velasco: You did a good job, Carl. Was there a pony track at all?

Carl S. Christensen: Thank you, yes. On Elizabeth Avenue behind School No. 18 there used to be a pony racetrack. The Miele family used to have little pony carts and they used to have races on Sunday. If you were to go back there you could probably still see outlines where they had graded and dug everything out. Going back into the '30s John Miele, who's still alive today and lives on the corner of North Juliette and Middlesex Avenue.....do you now John, have you interviewed him?

Brenda Velasco: Sure have.

Carl S. Christensen: Okay, he can tell you an awful lot but his father used to do a lot of the work. He used to go and plow people's gardens.

Brenda Velasco: They were in landscaping and then construction I believe.

Carl S. Christensen: Landscaping and construction, so is John. When he came out of the Marine Corp. he had an excavating business.

Brenda Velasco: Yes World War II; he was in World War II.

Carl S. Christensen: John Miele used to, at different times, help the fire company. He was a member also of the fire company but he used to help us on brushfires by cutting paths to stop the fire: fire breaks.

Brenda Velasco: It was a community that worked together.

Carl S. Christensen: Yes. The early fire apparatus in our company that we had: a Clinton, a Buffalo and a 36 LaFrance. They bought a utility truck from Mountainside, it was a Ford. Then they had a Tasks fire engine that was purchased in the early '60s. Then they had a '54 LaFrance, a '64 LaFrance, a '74 LaFrance, a '86 LaFrance and now what they have today plus numerous other vehicles. Did you ever get a hold of a history of the fire company?

Brenda Velasco: No.

Carl S. Christensen: We have a book; it has some stuff in it.

Brenda Velasco: That would be good for our future museum when we do all fire companies. That would be a great unit especially for the kids to come in and see.

Carl S. Christensen: I'll try to get one before they all disappear.

Brenda Velasco: I'd appreciate it very, very much. Okay, it's almost noontime and I've had a great deal of enjoyment interviewing you but we're going to have to call it quits so thank you very much.