

Oral History Interview
Catherine Douglas Clark Burns
WH065

(written transcript and digital audio)

On September 18, 2009, Catherine Douglas Clark Burns was interviewed at her home at 434 Cliff Road, Sewaren by Brenda Velasco at 10:00 A.M.

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

Catherine Burns: I'm Catherine Douglas Clark Burns. I was born August 25, 1926.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge-Sewaren?

Catherine Burns: I have lived in Sewaren all my life except for when I went to Elmira College in Elmira, New York in 1944.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so you've lived here for eighty-three years.

Catherine Burns: No, I was just eighty-three so take three years off of that.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so about eighty years then.

Catherine Burns: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So you've seen a lot of changes.

Catherine Burns: Oh, yes a lot.

Brenda Velasco: And I am so fascinated with this view over the water. Catherine Burns is a guru of Sewaren history. She's the one I always come to for all my little facts and she always supplies them. She's written several articles so we're really going to have a great, great interview today.

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

Catherine Burns: Both of my parents grew up in Messina, New York which is right at the end of New York State on the St. Lawrence River. The only reason they landed up here was a fraternity friend of my father from Colgate University, and also a Messina resident, suggested Sewaren because he worked in New York. When my father arrived in 1922, he started working in New York City. So that's how they landed in this little town way far away from Messina, New York where I have many, many relatives.

Brenda Velasco: And it's quite cold there.

Catherine Burns: Oh! It made the list of the coldest temperature many times for many years and I never quite believed his stories of the Main Street being so snow covered. They had tunnels going across the street.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: But I don't know whether to believe those snow stories or not but, yes very, very cold and lots of snow.

Brenda Velasco: So when he moved here he was working in New York.

Catherine Burns: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And how did he get back and forth?

Catherine Burns: By train.

Brenda Velasco: Where was the train stop that he took?

Catherine Burns: Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: Which isn't there anymore.

Catherine Burns: Well the tracks, unfortunately, are still there.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Catherine Burns: That was the Central Railroad of New Jersey which was started by John Taylor Johnson who was the president. To get customers for his railroad he built a station here and at the height of Boynton Beach. The stations were identical in size: Matawan's Station is identical to the one that used to be here in Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: And where was it exactly located?

Catherine Burns: When you cross the tracks from the light, at the track level you went down the stairs and the station was at the backyard of all the houses that are now from West Avenue and Woodbridge Avenue on the eastside all the way back to Barbara Basehart's two yellow Victorians across from the library (155 West). So it was a U shaped driveway. It started right at Woodbridge Avenue and circled around to the station, that bright station, and then out almost to the street that the library is on.

Brenda Velasco: Okay where Sewaren's free public library is?

Catherine Burns: Yes, and he had it beautifully landscaped and they gave him an annual prize for the best landscaped station all along the whole route.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: It eventually became the last covered official football/baseball field for all the kids in Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: Beautiful, and when did it close, that station?

Catherine Burns: Oh, it burned down.

Brenda Velasco: Oh!

Catherine Burns: I remember we went to Woodbridge and came home and we couldn't figure out what all this water was on Woodbridge Avenue and so we missed the whole fire. But the beautiful pine trees all along that circular thing were so hot that it burnt the paint off the fire trucks. That's the only jam up that we have of that incident. I have to look it up to see exactly when it burned.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, I know since I've lived here since 1967 it's never.....

Catherine Burns: Oh, no, way before then.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Catherine Burns: In the '50s.

Brenda Velasco: Oh.

Catherine Burns: Or late '40s.

Brenda Velasco: And then they never rebuilt?

Catherine Burns: No.

Brenda Velasco: And it's mostly commercial, the freight train.

Catherine Burns: Totally commercial now.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, freight train.

Catherine Burns: Unfortunately.

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

Brenda Velasco: You mentioned the train stop is no longer here.

Catherine Burns: Yes, that's no longer there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, how about houses?

Catherine Burns: Many new houses, of course, have been built and the last place on Cliff Road was **Turk's Tavern** which would have been south of the **Sewaren Hotel**. That, of course, is no longer around and the houses have been moved. A lot of the summer cottages on the three streets south of Ferry Street, this is now on, oh what's the company next to C????

Brenda Velasco: I don't recall.

Catherine Burns: Anyway, after the park, the first driveway in was the first street of the three streets of summer cottages just like down at the shore and many of those were moved. There are a couple on New Street one of which was a dance hall and the man, you've got to interview him if he's still alive, moved it twice. Once across from **Moby Dicks** on the western end of Ferry Street Park and then he moved it to New Street and made a two family house out of it.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: And many houses around there, small bungalows, were from the beach area and the old store at the corner of West Avenue and Woodbridge Avenue, the northwest where the deli and beauty parlor are now, was a three story building. And it used to be a store, **Whittaker**' who had a clothespin factory in the southwest portion of the town which was settled the earliest because it was all on the river. That was the very earliest settlements of anything. He had the post office first; it was also a post office until it was finally moved when John Taylor Johnson had the railroad station built. He had a newsstand on one side of the big wide broad wooden sidewalk. It went all around the whole building. You'd get your newspaper there and everybody walked up to the post office before we had mail delivery. That's how you knew what was going on in town.

Brenda Velasco: That was the gossip center.

Catherine Burns: Yes, well, I don't know about that.

Brenda Velasco: But you found out all the news.

Catherine Burns: Yes, you found out all the news.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so the post office was originally on West.....

Catherine Burns: West Avenue, the corner there, and then when the station was built they moved all the equipment over to the station.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, which was meant to have the mail picked up, the bags of mail.

Catherine Burns: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: It was right on the train you mean.

Catherine Burns: And it was a big iron bar that they hung the bags of mail to and the train picked it up on the go. The northern end was where the freight wall was and it had a big cast iron pot bellied stove in the middle with benches all around. That was the waiting room of the station and I remember you could still sit in there when we took the bus to Woodbridge High School.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, that's where you picked up the bus.

Catherine Burns: Yes, the bus came up there to pick Sewaren residents to go to the high school because School No. 12 was built in 1912 and was originally just four

rooms and then they added four more and the auditorium. I went there from kindergarten to eighth grade. So you see I was totally concerned with Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes.

Catherine Burns: And you only went to Woodbridge, and there was no Turnpike, so you walked across what my parents and everybody called *The Causeway*, which is now Woodbridge Avenue, for shopping and everything.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was called *The Causeway* when you were growing up?

Catherine Burns: It was called *The Causeway*.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Catherine Burns: And the picnic tables down at the beach are no longer there. The eastern end, closest to the water on Ferry Street, was full of trees, picnic tables and benches and fieldstone fireplaces.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: People would go out on their boats and then they'd come in and have a picnic. Even my kids, called it *The Grove* and they're in their fifties now. That's how many trees were at the eastern end and now more and more parking for the boat trailers.

Brenda Velasco: Right.

Catherine Burns: It consumed so much of that park and it was called The Bumper Strip Park and they went and put oil tanks right up to Ferry Street.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, my gosh!

Catherine Burns: Yes, like the last street on West Avenue before you go over the bridge. There are houses on one side and Shell tanks on the other side.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Catherine Burns: So for years it was known as the Bumper Strip as we were trying desperately to keep that a park and not have oil tanks on that site.

Brenda Velasco: You succeeded with that.

Catherine Burns: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That was one of our success stories.

Catherine Burns: Yes and the houses on the east side of West Avenue are all new from the east corner of Woodbridge Avenue up to Barbara Basehart's. Those are all new and there are still many of the houses that I remember as a child on West Avenue. There has been building, of course, and spreading out especially towards Port Reading because the **PSE&G** towers created an area of non-building there for a while. Okay, so I told you about **Whittaker's** store.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, you did. Was that the only store?

Catherine Burns: That was an early one and when I was growing up you could walk down, after the access road of Old Road which goes from Port Reading Avenue. I have maps showing it going right into Perth Amboy. It was Old Road all the way.....

Brenda Velasco: To Perth Amboy.

Catherine Burns: And I'm sure Shell Oil, which still refers to it as State Street, technically it was Old Road up to the bridge to Perth Amboy.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! Okay.

Catherine Burns: And there was a grocery store, when I was growing up, and **Spooney's Barber Shop**, and there was an early library there. The original one is in Barbara Basehart's backyard.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: Which is now yellow and it's right next to their barn which is the first lot that you come to after what was railroad property. that was originally the office of the **Sewaren Improvement Company** which had the most luxurious brochures of buying a house in Sewaren and John Taylor Johnson owned everything east of Old Road and at that time East Avenue didn't even extend to Port Reading because that was **Kutcher's Farm**.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so there was a farm there?

Catherine Burns: After Debra Place, north, and he provided milk. I don't know I never heard him reference to vegetables or anything. The real estate office on West Avenue eventually became the first library which was established in 1913 because in a couple of more years, the library itself, which was established by women, will be one hundred years old.

Brenda Velasco: Well I hope you're having some big celebration?

Catherine Burns: I hope I live long enough. I keep throwing this date around at Library Board meetings.

Brenda Velasco: This is an important date.

Catherine Burns: Oh, yes. It's a date of the establishment of the library and they got fifty books from the State and everybody donated something. Somebody a waste basket, somebody lumber, **Boynton's Lumber** supplied shelves, somebody a desk pad, an ink blotter and there were many contributions and they started in August of 1913. December they had an opening day. Of course, it was very small.

Brenda Velasco: But it was a start.

Catherine Burns: Oh, it was a start and that was the expansion of the Sewaren History Club which was started by a bunch of women reading history at her house on Cliff Road.

Brenda Velasco: Do you remember her name?

Catherine Burns: Helen Glidden Grant Toms. It started with women sitting on the porch reading ancient history. Now this became a Federated Women's Club. It was organized in 1903 and by 1908 they were State Federated and by 1913 on the National Registration as a Federated Women's Club. These women were movers and shakers, believe me.

Brenda Velasco: They sure were, you had the history preserved because when does Boynton Beach, which is in this area, naturally, when does it decline? Was it a big fire which brings about its decline? You weren't born then.

Catherine Burns: No, I wasn't born. **Shell** came in 1927 and really the decline would have been with the fire at the hotel but it was gradual. The thing that really began its decline was when people began to have cars and could travel to the shore. See this was the shore at the time, the Jersey Shore. It was sandy beaches and when people began to get cars, and there weren't all that many when I was a child, and the Boynton Beach sign was if you'd stand on the bridge to Perth Amboy and look back towards Sewaren- to your right was that big Boynton Beach sign and **Boynton Lumber Company** was to the right of that on the river going back towards

Woodbridge Avenue. That was all active river property. And not that this place was that big but that's where most of the early industries developed and the entire site of **Shell Oil** and **Royal** used to be part of Boynton Beach all the way up. I have a good aerial photograph with that circle, all the way up to Ferry Street.

Brenda Velasco: So, this was a big area?

Catherine Burns: Oh it was very big. I'm trying desperately to find out if Boynton Beach in Florida is named after Boynton Beach here. Because when Flagler went to develop Florida, it was nothing but swamp land. He was a railroad owner, and I figured all these railroad men knew one another because Johnson owned several other lines in this area before he started building up the **Central Jersey Line** and I figured at the height of Boynton Beach's property it was a good suggested possible name for Boynton Beach, Florida. But I haven't actually gotten proof of it yet but I've gotten, Sandy Van Orden who gave me the name of a Flagler that is still involved in railroad so it may have nothing to do with it but I'll pursue that.

Brenda Velasco: Interesting. How about churches?

Catherine Burns: There was always St. John's Church. It started originally meeting in the Ballard house which is four up from here and it was once owned by John Taylor Johnson, I just found out, which was his originally home. When they had a major celebration, I should know the year they had that, they started at this house and paraded as they did initially when they got the church bell. They left the private home where they had been meeting in residences and paraded up the road to St. John's. So that was a very early church and it's been struggling for years because it's really so small, the congregation now, but I'm delighted that they are still active.

Brenda Velasco: Because I know the pastor frequently comes into Woodbridge where it would be interfaith.

Catherine Burns: Good, I'm delighted. It has many beautiful stained glass windows and at Christmastime the Ballards always had an open house following a community Christmas Eve service and where you met all the rest of the town.

Brenda Velasco: So that goes back quite a ways.

Catherine Burns: Oh, yes.

Brenda Velasco: Were there any other churches?

Catherine Burns: No because the Christian Science Church started in 1920.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Catherine Burns: First Church of Christ Scientists is the technical name and I taught summer school there in my junior years. When all the families moved away, after **Shell** came in, there was rumor of a steel factory here. I found Jim Adams, former mayor, his father was so against it he led the fight to keep that out. Then I did come across different publicity of people that were very much in favor of it because it meant jobs and everything. So the people, many of the families that I grew up with, moved away and it became, to them, very industrial.

Brenda Velasco: And this became very industrial with **Shell** moving in and then the area became.....

Catherine Burns: And then **Public Service** and **Hess**; so it's changed its character totally from its earlier days. And the Land and Water Club was another building that's no longer here. It blew down during the hurricane of 1939. It was a very active, very social place and a band from New York City would come in for dances

and cotillions and anniversary parties. My mother said she remembers you didn't dare go down there except in full formal wear with white gloves up to here.

Brenda Velasco: Oh my gosh!

Catherine Burns: So she, as a young bride, was very impressed with the glamour of it and they had regular regattas. Their membership books were full color printed.

Brenda Velasco: Expensive.

Catherine Burns: Yes, and eventually the Republican Club bought it and kept it open. Sunday afternoons were like a community center and there would be two or three tables of either bridge or pinnacle. People with baby carriages parading the long deck out to the water so that you could deck; they would come by boat. It was just like an open house every Sunday, Saturdays and Sundays, and many people enjoyed that. Then it had double fold doors that folded back like barn doors and the storm blew those doors in and the whole place just ended up a pile of kindling. The piers are still visible.

Brenda Velasco: Where exactly was that?

Catherine Burns: At the end of Holton. I remember one time a gang of us kids said, would you rent it to us for free if we clean it up? I remember, I think, we just used the water from the sound to mop the floors which apparently was a beautiful, beautiful dance floor and they said sure. So we cleaned the place up in the spring for a dance that we had down there.

Brenda Velasco: So you've got a lot of happy memories of social events here.

Catherine Burns: Oh yes, absolutely.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, looking over Question #4 we've covered houses and the streets were paved down here?

Catherine Burns: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, did you have well water?

Catherine Burns: No, I don't know of any wells. I've never heard of any active wells here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Catherine Burns: Sewaren is basically at zero sea level and anything you dig down to is clay or at least it is in this yard. I'm sure it's elsewhere and only cultivated beds would produce vegetables and flowers and something because you just hit clay. I really don't know of any wells.

Brenda Velasco: No, in other parts of the township there were but I've never heard of it in this area.

Catherine Burns: I never heard of it either.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and so you didn't have mail delivery in the beginning because you had to go to the post office. Did you have Public Works picking up garbage?

Catherine Burns: There was garbage collection. On Cliff Road there's a single lane road in the back, a dirt road, because all the gas, sewer and water pipes all ran down that street and water, only recently as you had more development of marinas. I think all of them have it now but it was a job to get water lines to these marinas and then finally I guess it runs along the whole street now but it didn't used to be in the front. Mostly the houses on East Avenue and Broad Street had provisions in their deeds that nobody could be denied access to the beach, to the waterfront. And when you come down Woodbridge Avenue to St. John's Church and turn right within a few feet there

was an access point which I have to investigate whether it's still observed that nobody could ever build on so that you had access to the waterfront and it's in many of those deeds and that was back when I thought people had a right to insure the water.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, this is quite unusual.

Catherine Burns: And it was the site where we sledged down what we called Brown's Hill because the house across from St. John's was occupied by Mrs. Brown and for so many years it was referred to as Brown's Hill. We'd go down from East Avenue onto Woodbridge Avenue we'd go down the hill and turn right and the brave souls would go down this little hill right to the waterfront. Only the brave ones would venture....

Brenda Velasco: Because you might end up.....

Catherine Burns: Because you might end up in the water.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's go on to Question #5 then.

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

Brenda Velasco: We talked about the post office, when does the library finally get located where it's.....

Catherine Burns: In the '60s when all these people moved away from the church and they finally decided that they had to dispose of it.

Brenda Velasco: You're talking about the First Church.....

Catherine Burns: of Christ Science, the Christian Science Church. So they sold it very reasonably in the '60s to the library and they were very glad to get it.

Brenda Velasco: And it's a good location.

Catherine Burns: Oh, it's a marvelous location.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, parks, did you have.....

Catherine Burns: We had the Bumper Strip Park and the more recent little local ones in Sewaren and the peninsula had a men's area in Sewaren. The woman organized it and I guess they decided they needed the men's help financially and so they allowed the men to be associate members. They were never classified as full members. So they had the plans, I've got the projected funding when they wanted to build the marina out there and the prices would just make you laugh they were so cheap for bulk cutting heading and this and that. They wanted to develop that and for years we used that park. It's been dedicated numerable times. I remember once the pastor from the White Church, they were flying balloons out there, and he blessed it as a park and it's been dedicated like two or three times every time we get involved (the Civic Association). In our environmental years with the LNG, we had a thirteen year fight to beat that and we'd throw this park in and we always wanted to do something with it and the road that goes out there now when you go to the **Public Service** access road where the road is was a path, you could always get out there. I remember when at some hearing in Trenton, I forget which one it was, **Public Service** could never deny us access to that park. And we'd throw that in as a dedicated park which the State or the Federal Government regarded as a fairly sacred right, you know.

Brenda Velasco: Was it the Sewaren Civic Association?

Catherine Burns: The Woodbridge Council even hired a lawyer in Washington before the Federal Power Commission. And Elizabeth Kleban was the Environment Chairman of the Sewaren Civic Association at that time. One time we had about fifteen names at the bottom to send copies of a letter expressing the danger of the whole thing. If any accident happened, it would have been from New York to New Brunswick.

Brenda Velasco: And you're talking about that LNG by Staten Island?

Catherine Burns: Because the water transportation was so hazardous at that time. Some of the people got the letter and they figured all these other people know about this, I've got to do something. We found a very effective way to spread the word.

Brenda Velasco: You sure did.

Catherine Burns: So that was a beautiful wild sanctuary just bulrushes and people would go hunting out there and there would be quail and rabbits and it was like you were in a different world. When they dredged the sound, because the channel is very close here to this side, at low tide you think these giant tankards are going to run the ground. It's very, very close to this side. So they piped all the sludge up into the center and I have a picture, an aerial photograph of this big round brown blob in the center of the peninsula but it was such wet watery sludge that the retaining wall that they built across from Smith's Creek to protect it, eventually blew down when the water just broke that barricade. The number of boats, one banged into another and it just swept like an avalanche. The damage to the docks and boats was terrific and they just went out in a flood one crashing into another. Boats ended up on Staten Island and some kids had actually gotten aboard these boats to try to save them. That was a terrible mess when the dike broke.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall the year when the dike broke?

Catherine Burns: That I would have to look up.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Catherine Burns: I'm not sure exactly when that was, whenever the dredging of the sound appeared.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, when you fought that thirteen year fight to prevent LNG from that liquefied natural gas coming in what decade was that, do you recall? Was it the '80s or '70s?

Catherine Burns: '60s or '70s, I haven't gotten to that file yet. I'm trying to get all my files in order. I could give you a date on that but not at the moment.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, do you have a firehouse in Sewaren?

Catherine Burns: No, but we had **Shell** who had their own fire trucks. Sewaren is included with Woodbridge district so we depended on **Shell Oil** for fire protection.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and I know you went to Woodbridge High School when it was on Barron Avenue. But School No 12 where was that located?

Catherine Burns: One Sewaren Avenue, which is now, that's another change, the church.

Brenda Velasco: That's right. So that's where you went to school. Okay and you went from K through 8 there?

Catherine Burns: Yes.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Catherine Burns: Also **Moby Dicks** is still there, it was the **Whitehouse**. That was referred to at the Sewaren Country Club and that's still operating well.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, it is.

Catherine Burns: I think it has more members than St. John's- which is the liquor.

Brenda Velasco: I wonder about human nature and that gets us into recreation because that is not spiritual there.

Catherine Burns: Well, we learned to swim in the creek and Oliver Ames who was the son of Helen Boynton Ames lived at the last house before East Avenue hits Cliff Road. On the docks, he had a fishing pole and he had a harness, like a baby's harness, you know, like a high chair harness. He'd hook you in the back and hold you up and you'd flapped around swimming and many kids learned how to swim like that.

Brenda Velasco: That was a great way to learn.

Catherine Burns: Absolutely, because he had control over you and we swam in the creek and I remember each year they wouldn't let the girls swim in the creek because the water got dirtier up to the point where we had all the oil spills. It got increasingly dirtier and it's Class II water up to the bridge to Staten Island and north of that. It was at one point zero oxygen in that water which fish could not even swim through.

Brenda Velasco: Oh my gosh!

Catherine Burns: It's cleaner now.

Brenda Velasco: When did you guys start noticing because you were born in 1927, when did you start noticing the water?

Catherine Burns: 1926.

Brenda Velasco: 1926, okay.

Catherine Burns: My teen years I think.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so in the 1930s?

Catherine Burns: No, people were still going down the beach. There was sand but not as much sand as there used to be and people still swam in that. By the late '30s it started getting dirty.

Brenda Velasco: And **Shell** was here by that time?

Catherine Burns: Yes. And we went ice skating on Simonsen's Pond. You know when you go over the overpass of the railroad on West Avenue, if you look to the right you see a body of water that was originally Simonsen's, because Simonsen's had a farm around there; I don't know exactly where and everybody ice skated there. Once I skated on the creek, I'll never forget that. It was actually frozen not at the southern end of it but it was hard enough and I don't know what year that was. That was way before the '40s, way before. Then Henry Nickanen, with his Model T Ford, the famous picture sitting on the ice in Perth Amboy at the Lighthouse, have you ever seen that picture?

Brenda Velasco: I haven't.

Catherine Burns: He had a car out there on the ice in the middle of the sound. If I find the date on that- that was probably when the creek froze over, he would tow children on their sleds. You hooked your heels of the first part of the next sled so you'd still maneuver it and he had twelve or fifteen kids and he'd slowly drive around. Now when snow fell you waited and nothing happened until it melted. There was no snow equipment and the roads weren't plowed or anything and he

would drive around East Avenue. I don't remember anything west, it must have been east of West Avenue because that was becoming more heavily traveled and he would just drive slowly around and that was a big thrill. Of course the bravest kids would be on the end because that would be the.....

Brenda Velasco: Oh, that's the tail end.

Catherine Burns: The tail end. It would curve around, I remember that. Then we'd walk, took lots of walks, and bicycle riding and at home you read or played cards. My father would say, well have you read this book or have you read that book.

Brenda Velasco: So your father was on you to read.

Catherine Burns: Oh, yes. He'd say, well have you read *The Last of the Mohicans*? He was always pushing that for some reason or another. There were no malls. You didn't go parading around a mall or hang out but you walked around. I remember December 7th walking with two other girls. We were watching the boys play, I guess it was football, what I think now is the site of the Glen Clove School area, which was wide open then and had been, later on, was government housing, temporary housing. That is why that property is so big that the school is on. And we had just been walking around and stopped to watch them and another friend stopped and he had his car radio on and we heard about December 7th.

Brenda Velasco: Pearl Harbor.

Catherine Burns: And I remember looking at all of these boys and thinking they are all going to be involved with it. So that was '41 and all of them did go, everyone that I can think of did. And there has always been a great rapport among the kids in Sewaren because it was a small enough town for everybody to know everybody. I could see it with my husband's group of friends maintaining friendships through the years and I can see the same thing with my sons knowing boys of their age because it was a small enough area that you came in contact with these people on a regular basis. You see its only a square mile, you could walk anywhere in Sewaren and you walked across what was *The Causeway* or Woodbridge Avenue to the football games behind the American Legion. That's where the football field was. So you walked over there and walked home and didn't think anything more than that.

Brenda Velasco: And that's what you did mostly was walk and it was good exercise.

Catherine Burns: Or bicycle ride and of course it was much safer to ride a bicycle than it is now.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, do you feel we answered enough for Question #6 for the recreation?

Catherine Burns: Oh, yes I think so.

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

Catherine Burns: To keep its own identity. Sewaren was full of mavericks. Because there were enough people left that came here at the height of the glamorous Boynton Beach era to try to retain that atmosphere and so many became **Shell Oil, Hess, CP Chemical**.....

Brenda Velasco: Oh I forgot that one.

Catherine Burns: That was a good fight. That was a dirty place. And the last one was the cell tower and also we had two attempts at succession. I remember Peggy Toms, a dear friend of mine, we were racking our brains. You know the reason it was

possible, which the State recognized, Woodbridge was never incorporated. Rahway used to be part of Woodbridge, Piscataway, you know all these different parts broke away from Woodbridge Township. They could do it legally and the State made it retroactive. At that time we had sixty-eight percent of the ratables in the town between **Shell** and **Public Service**; it would have disrupted the school system.

Brenda Velasco: They were not going to allow you to secede or succeed with the secession.

Catherine Burns: That was interesting.

Brenda Velasco: And when were those battles fought, in what decade, do you remember? After college?

Catherine Burns: Oh I was married then. I'm trying to figure how old my children were at the time of these things. I'd have to look that up later.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I hadn't been aware of that.

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

Catherine Burns: Its small town quiet atmosphere. You knew everybody. You went up to the post office for mail and the Boy Scouts would raise the flag at the park which again was established by the women. It was a weed filled triangle when Old Road went across Woodbridge Avenue and it was just nothing but weeds and the women decided it should be a park and clean it up. They arranged for a pole. They had to sail around, I have to look up where it came from; it couldn't go through the Panama Canal and it went all around, it was so big. They had a parade when they finally got this flagpole installed. A parade of children from the railroad property led by a band, the town's people followed them; and they had a flag raising and had an invocation. They had somebody speak as toastmaster and when they raised the flag inside it were all these little flags that went up to the top and fluttered down.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, how nice.

Catherine Burns: I've never seen that again.

Brenda Velasco: Do you remember the year?

Catherine Burns: In the early teens, I'd have to look that up. But anyway that was also proposed by the women and accomplished. Minnie Adams was the one responsible for getting the school built because she went and inventoried all the children in Sewaren and proved there were enough children. That was the mother of the former mayor. She was very instrumental in cleaning up that unsightly weed filled lot.

Brenda Velasco: We're talking about the Buffer Strip?

Catherine Burns: So we're talking about the park in Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: Oh the park in Sewaren.

Catherine Burns: The triangular park between Woodbridge west and Old Road.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I know where it is.

Catherine Burns: The Boy Scouts would raise that flag in my teen years, this would be in the '40s, and lower it each day and when it was at half staff you knew that somebody died in town. That was a practice for many years by the many Boy Scouts. And you had enough good stores in Woodbridge for extra shopping.

Brenda Velasco: And that's where you went.

Catherine Burns: You went to Woodbridge and sometimes the bigger stores in Perth Amboy. I never shopped in Rahway for some reason or another but I remember if you couldn't get what you wanted in Perth Amboy you went to, well Newark had department stores.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, Newark was **Hahnes**.

Catherine Burns: Or Plainfield had very glamorous stores and Newark had department stores.

Brenda Velasco: But you basically had, for everyday living, you were self-contained.

Catherine Burns: Yes, we were self-contained and there were buses.

Brenda Velasco: And where did the buses take you?

Catherine Burns: To Perth Amboy or Woodbridge. They probably went to Carteret on this line. And Boynton was responsible for getting the trolley line carried down here, extended here, so people could come to Boynton Beach. I've met people that lived elsewhere in New Jersey and they can remember getting on the bus to come here and that was a big deal to come to Boynton Beach. The reason that Broad Street is on an angle from Ferry Street going north up to East Avenue is because that was the turnaround place for the beach area; but that was the way you got back to the main trolley line. I can remember when I lived on Holton Street for thirteen years before I came back here. When they redid the road, they took up the trolley tracks which had just been paved over previously.

Brenda Velasco: So we don't have any more of the trolley tracks?

Catherine Burns: No, no more trolley tracks.

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

Brenda Velasco: You mentioned a lot of the significant happenings in Woodbridge but I think you want to relate more to Sewaren.

Catherine Burns: You said I was to talk about Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: I want you to talk about Sewaren.

Catherine Burns: I'm not throwing anything else in. The worst thing that happened here was the barge explosion which was not that many years ago. It blew apart my chimney on the north side.

Brenda Velasco: This was a few years ago wasn't it?

Catherine Burns: Yes, just a few years ago. I was up at the library on the desk and it was the loudest noise I've ever heard in many years. I thought the roof was caving in or something and I went out to the front steps and saw all this smoke and I thought a railroad accident had happened just back of the houses on West Avenue on the Sewaren tracks. The black smoke was tremendous and I could not believe, and this was across from the beach area on Staten Island, and the damage of doors and windows got heavier the closer you got to the point across from Staten Island. (2003)

Brenda Velasco: Okay, across from the explosion.

Catherine Burns: There wasn't much damage further up; the impact of that left my chimney down.

Brenda Velasco: And this was during the summer; I remember this was during the summer.

Catherine Burns: Yes, and I could not believe when they finally said on the radio what it was. I was relieved but I really thought it was an accident right here in Sewaren on the tracks and that some trains had collided. And I've kind of become immune to **Shell's** malfunctions. We had people that packed up and moved out when there was a fire or something.

Brenda Velasco: There was a big fire in 1996.

Catherine Burns: The biggest one was when the lightning struck it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, was that 1996?

Catherine Burns: I'd have to look it up. But they had become more efficient in firefighting equipment and compounds but that was always the question with the LNG tank, what if a plane hit it? Because the walls were thirteen feet thick but the ceiling of the thing wasn't and we always kept asking what happened and I climbed to the top of that. We had some of the braver councilmen actually attend that open house. We said, what happens if you don't get the permits? They went ahead and built that thing without having all their permits. And they said, well if they wouldn't get all the permits they'll.....

Brenda Velasco: But that's New York.

Catherine Burns: That's New York.

Brenda Velasco: New York is different.

Catherine Burns: Well this is now under federal.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, okay, but.....

Catherine Burns: The Federal Power Commission had the ultimate control over that and that's one of the problems now with the ethanol deliveries, constant deliveries, that's federal because the railroad has got so much privilege and laws in their favor at the time when there was nothing to protect it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so we mentioned some accidents. Anything else in Question #9, sports events, riots, discrimination?

Catherine Burns: We don't have riots in Sewaren. The sporting events now consist of bicycle races around the town or many walking tours of the peninsula. It really is greatly used. Oh, as time went on, people became less in favor of developing the park because it got busier. Leave it to the birds, nature works only. I have got three different plans and the second one proposed was only a rehash of the first one when the Council and the mayor brought in outside people to ask, what would you do with this? As time went on people said, don't develop it just leave it as natural as you can. So it ended up us using it for years.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I just want to say that Sewaren Park is one of my favorite parks. You can go there, there's a track to walk, the kids can look at planes, trains or boats because I bring my grandson; it is underutilized.

Catherine Burns: The one problem is access because there is no bicycling, maybe carriages going down there, and you've got to be very careful with the speed limit and it's a shame that there isn't some kind of a sidewalk put there. But then the access road, once you get to **Public Service** is so narrow. That's the only thing but I hope it just keeps people driving slowly.

Brenda Velasco: It does.

Catherine Burns: People walk around the 8/10 of a mile and my son and daughter-in-law take their bicycles out there.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, it's just great. You are out there and you do feel this naturalness.

Catherine Burns: And there's always a boat going by.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, and it's a great, great park. You don't believe you're in Woodbridge, New Jersey. Yes, you're in Sewaren, New Jersey I know that.

Catherine Burns: Do you know there were people in Colonia that didn't know where Sewaren was, for years.

Brenda Velasco: Colonia is a little myopic at times, okay.

Catherine Burns: Anytime another industry was proposed here we'd say put it in Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: Well I'm from Colonia so I know the problem with Colonia. We tend to orient ourselves to Union County or Edison and we forget we are part of Woodbridge. I don't, but some do.

Catherine Burns: And also the area of Woodbridge is so large that it's hard for people to identify themselves as part of a township. And Sewaren is part of the prime example of why people don't, but each area is different in its own way. It's very hard to be cohesive. One of the best things I think is the realization that the mayor realized that we are a very historic town. I've been vastly discouraged by the State or the County's reports on activities. One of the State's places to visit wouldn't even mention Woodbridge. There was nothing worth seeing.

Brenda Velasco: Well, we're trying to change that.

Catherine Burns: And the County even.

Brenda Velasco: We just had two trolley tours in Woodbridge, we're getting the cemetery tours and I am pushing, pushing, pushing. We've got Dolores Gioffre.

Catherine Burns: Oh, she's a godsend.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Catherine Burns: And having the Historical Preservation Commission actually doing something which for years they didn't.

Brenda Velasco: We just got the funding for the second walking tour pamphlet.

Catherine Burns: Oh good.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, so this is great.

Catherine Burns: And the church is holding the site for a Drew University Conference on cemeteries, a class about forty people. This is in October (2009).

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: The class is in the morning and Mark Nonestied is giving it. They're talking in the morning and doing rubbings in the afternoon after they have lunch.

Brenda Velasco: That'll be great!

Catherine Burns: That's all I know about it because the Head of the Heritage Committee, which now comprises people my age unfortunately.....

Brenda Velasco: With vast knowledge.

Catherine Burns: Emma Arroe and I are house sitting the Fellowship Hall so they're mostly using it as a site. They do rubbings in the cemetery in Woodbridge at the White Church. So that's coming up.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Brenda Velasco: We've gone into Question #10. What Do You Like About Woodbridge today? You mentioned about finally being included in the history.

Catherine Burns: Yes, which is a vast development. Woodbridge has so many things that other people should know about and we shouldn't hang our head about the Revolution. Woodbridge was occupied for over a year during the Revolution.

Brenda Velasco: And we had the first mill and we had the first printing press with James Parker.

Catherine Burns: So there's so much for other people to see and so much to try to preserve. I'm glad to see that they are trying to maintain Main Street with as many restaurants and having different activities to draw people to it. And I'm glad they took out the parking meters.

Brenda Velasco: So am I.

Catherine Burns: Between the Barron Arts Center and the interest in art and history is definitely an improvement over the previous years' activities.

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

Catherine Burns: Marian Dunner on the second floor and Sean is on the third floor.

Brenda Velasco: And Sean is getting married soon.

Catherine Burns: Yes, he is.

Brenda Velasco: Okay so your son is on the second floor.....

Catherine Burns: And my other son moved from Hackettstown to a house on Oak Street which he gutted and rebuilt to live in while he was going to redo the Carriage House which is older than this house. It was moved here after the house was built. This house goes back to 1895. But unfortunately his plans got turned down.

Brenda Velasco: And how old is your carriage house?

Catherine Burns: I'm sorry there are so many questions I should have asked my parents.

Brenda Velasco: That's why we're recording you, okay.

Catherine Burns: It was a barn and had an apartment on the second floor. I remember there were old plumbing fixtures in one corner and when I was a kid the left side was for the horses with stalls and an iron grate racked up in the corner to put hay in for the horses.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Catherine Burns: And a little closet that had reins and leather stuff in it. So it was a great place to play when it rained; and the right side was for carriages and the left side for horses. I know it was older than the house. For instance they moved lots of big old things, like St. James Church was moved.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, okay.

Catherine Burns: And the **Whittaker Store** at the corner was moved down. That's now a three story apartment house on the corner of Woodbridge Avenue and Meade Street on the north side and that was a big building; they moved lots of things in the earlier days.

Brenda Velasco: And they also moved them in Fords, too. Okay, we're going to have to, unfortunately..... Can you think of any other stories that we failed to mention?

Catherine Burns: No, some of the women they fascinated me when this Helen Glidden Grant Toms started reading history books in the Woman's Club and then Minnie Adams with her knitting activities and the woman that established the library.

Brenda Velasco: The women played a vital role.

Catherine Burns: The women were the movers and shakers of developing things in the town.

Brenda Velasco: It was also in Fords, the Fords Women's Club.

Catherine Burns: Yes, that's another group that is still active.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes.

Catherine Burns: Because the History Club finally folded when so many women started going to work.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, we see that with many women's organizations. It wasn't just Sewaren or anything. Unfortunately, we have to conclude the interview. It's been fascinating out on your porch and thank you, thank you, thank you.