

**Oral History Interview
Claire Wallace Daniels
WH003**

(written transcript and digital audio)

Originally Claire Wallace Daniels was interviewed on May 7, 2008 at the Evergreen Senior Center by Brenda Velasco with students Samantha Moccciaro (Iselin Middle School) and Nazar Bedi (Fords Middle School). Because of technical difficulties, Claire Daniels was interviewed at a later date. Information included from the first interview is indicated by italics.

On May 27, 2009, Claire Wallace Daniels was interviewed at the Evergreen Senior Citizen Center by Brenda Velasco at 1:00 P.M. Also interviewing are some students from the Avenel Middle School and Iselin Middle School. They are Humza Farrukh (Avenel Middle School), Sandra Souied (Avenel Middle School), Regina Poerio (Avenel Middle School), Kaitlin Murphy (Avenel Middle School), Deanna Della Torre (Iselin Middle School), Julienne Viuya (Iselin Middle School), Ayushi Pathak (Iselin Middle School). Also in the audience is Nancy Paugh from the Woodbridge Board of Education and Dan D'Arcy, the Colonia historian.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Humza, we're going to start off with you with the first question.

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

Claire Daniels: My name is Claire Wallace Daniels. I live at 12 West Iselin Parkway in Iselin. My date of birth is February 6, 1929; that makes me eighty years old, though I hate to admit it.

Mr. D'Arcy: You don't look it.

Claire Daniels: Oh, thank you.

Brenda Velasco: You look great.

Claire Daniels: Thanks, I feel good, so far.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Sandra, question two.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Claire Daniels: Since 1953. I guess that's what fifty-eight years now; something like that.

Brenda Velasco: We will get our students to subtract right now and they will come up....

Claire Daniels: I think its forty-six years.

Student: Fifty-six.

Brenda Velasco: Fifty-six years.

Claire Daniels: Fifty-six.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, fifty-six years.

Claire Daniels: In the same house.

Brenda Velasco: More than half of a century.

Claire Daniels: I went through two husbands and four children and now I have great-children.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! You can bless them.

Claire Daniels: Thank you. Yes, I have.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Regina, you're next with question three.

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

Claire Daniels: Well, at that time, we were very young and we just had a second baby, I had like three boys in four years, so we didn't have much money and the homes here were very

inexpensive and although I came from the Oranges the taxes were like \$10.00 a month. I think my mortgage payment was like \$68.00 a month. The houses were only \$11,500.00 because we had an extra room on it. Otherwise it would have only been \$10,000.00 something. So we could afford it where as we bought a house in East Orange it would be way over our heads. We were passing through on Route #27, the Parkway just came in, and it stopped at Iselin so we had to get off and get on to another road to get back to East Orange and I remember seeing a sign saying Woodbridge Oaks, where they had an arrow pointing up New Dover Road. Of course that was very lovely, New Dover Road, and I thought well the whole place would be like that but, you know, I found out it wasn't. It was an old town and the houses were nice and you didn't have to pay much of a deposit because my husband was a war veteran, so I think there were no closing fees and we could put down \$10.00 and they would hold the house for us. It's wasn't all completely finished yet but we decided well we would take a chance. He didn't really want to live here. You know, he had his friends and everybody in East Orange and South Orange but I thought, well the children would have a big backyard and they wouldn't have much traffic. There was no traffic. After I moved in, every time a car passed we'd all run to the window to see who was having company. I think there were only two families on the block. The other houses were all empty. It was strange. I was telling Brenda it was like living at Green Acres. I mean, there was a turkey farm at the end of Wood Avenue but you couldn't get there because Wood Avenue had such deep holes in it that you'd lose the transmission in your car if you tried to drive down Wood Avenue. There was only a little gas station there that was never open, on Oak Tree Road and Wood Avenue, and they had the shades pulled down all the time. I could drive, when I did learn to drive, from Wood Avenue to Metuchen to go to the bank or grocery shopping and never see another car on the road. It was really funny, you know, but it was good for the children because they had Wood Avenue, which was all woods, and they could play. Up in the woods they had a tree fort and it was good for them. So we were satisfied; we were happy.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so you moved here because it was affordable?

Claire Daniels: It was affordable, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And be good for the children.

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Had you ever heard of Iselin before?

Claire Daniels: No, I didn't even hear of Iselin, they had it advertised as Woodbridge and it was part of the Woodbridge Oaks and when you came here it was mud. I mean, I would have a clothesline, of course after a while I couldn't go out and hang clothes because the mud was so deep, it was ridiculous. You know, I would have to hang the clothes in the house and, as I said, after having three little ones in four years, you know, I was mostly homebound at the time.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we have to pause here because most of these students have grown up with dryers. How many of you have dryers? Okay, you didn't have a dryer?

Claire Daniels: No.

Brenda Velasco: And were you familiar with disposable diapers?

Claire Daniels: No, we didn't have any of that. We had to hang.....

Brenda Velasco: So you had cloth diapers and those of you who babysit know what babies.....

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You're constantly changing diapers.

Claire Daniels: You didn't have any of that.

Brenda Velasco: And she had a washing machine.

Claire Daniels: Oh, yes, finally.

Mr. D'Arcy: They were rare.

Claire Daniels: Yes, I mean, that came with the house. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have had that either, you know, because we couldn't afford luxuries like that because I couldn't work at the time with the children. So, you know, it was an experience but it was fun because we were all in the same boat. I mean, I had FBI people living on either side of me, when they finally did move in. So a lot of people bought the houses because they were transferred from somewhere else and they figured it was better to be able to sell their home when they had to leave rather than pay rent somewhere. It was good for the children I thought. It was hard for me though because every time I had to take them to the doctor's (office), I'd have to wait for my husband to have the day off so we could ride up to the Oranges and go to the doctor's because there wasn't anyone down here that I knew of and we only had the one car in the beginning. In the beginning I couldn't drive. He taught me after I had my second child. It was a while after but the Parkway helped. It just went to Iselin at first and then, you know, it went further to East Orange after a while. So that made it a little easier. But we had a lot of crazy experiences; we had a lot of fun .

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Regina you're next right?

Regina: No Kaitlin.

Brenda Velasco: Kaitlin, okay, Kaitlin go ahead with question four.

Claire Daniels: What a pretty name.

Kaitlin: Thank you.

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

Claire Daniels: Well, I'll tell you, we had a newspaper that came out one time and told us that the area was going to be changed. It told us we were going to have a hospital and we would have grocery stores. Before that we would have to go to Metuchen or Rahway to go grocery shopping. I used to have to go to Newark to buy my children clothes for school because there was nowhere here unless you wanted to go to Perth Amboy. They didn't have much there either. So when I heard there was going to be a hotel it was almost impossible to believe that, you know, they were going to be able to get so much going here. I mean, there wasn't even a train station. If you wanted to go down and take the train you had to walk. We walked through storms because nobody ever shoveled the streets, they didn't believe in doing that I guess. We were like three days without being able to get out of the house. So it was like, I said, living in Green Acres. I guess you've never heard of Green Acres, right? They're so young.

Mr. D'Arcy: You mean the TV show?

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Student: I have.

Claire Daniels: Did you, yes, alright.

Brenda Velasco: It was like a farm area. This is what Mr. Bedner had said in the earlier interview and somebody else had said.

Claire Daniels: It was. There were no schools nearby. There was just the little library in Colonia, I found out later after I was here a while. That used to be a hospital for the WPA people. (corner of New Dover and Chain O' Hills)

Brenda Velasco: For the Great War Veterans.

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, because that is part of that estate over there for the hospital. Once again, the hospital was located there and Mr. D'Arci, correct me, but the railroad tracks were right there.

Claire Daniels: Oh, yes, and in order to get anywhere, like a lot of the people worked in New York, you'd have to walk down to the middle of Iselin where the train station was and go get on the train there and there was a little tiny post office that I found out was there, you know, because we didn't have a mailbox at first. So, it was interesting but, you know, after they told us that we were going to be joining the society of people that had banks, you know, I decided we'd stay because other than that it would have been very hard to move, you know. Then I found out, in the summer time like the only place you got to meet people was at the church and St. Cecelia's had a little Quonset hut where the kids went to school. It looked like a shack but it was a Quonset hut that the servicemen put up and I think they all donated their time and effort to make this a community and the children went to school there but they didn't have a bus or anything, we had to drive them down and they would walk. Then finally they did have bus transportation that was like maybe fifteen dollars a year, you know, everything was very reasonable then but, of course, nobody made that much money.

Mr. D'Arcy: Does anybody know what a Quonset hut is?

Student: No.

Brenda Velasco: That's going to be one of their research projects when they get back. Claire, do you want to describe it?

Claire Daniels: The servicemen had started it during the war. They were like barracks that they lived in and a Quonset hut was built something like a barrack but it would have like canvass roofs, you know, mostly canvass and wood.....

Brenda Velasco: If you saw *MASH*; have any of you seen *MASH*?

Students: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Those are similar to what a Quonset hut is.

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Mr. D'Arcy: It would be either canvass or all metal and it could be shaped like a tunnel. It looked like it had all metal on the top and the ends would be either canvass or wood.

Student: Okay, yes.

Claire Daniels: That's what St. Cecelia's school was like then. My uncle had run an affair for Father Wilus who was the pastor in South Amboy years ago and he had a connection with him and so he used to have a big Ferris wheel that he used to have for the children's rides. I think that's all he had and I said, you know it was like sort of a recession, and I said how do people afford to put their children on the Ferris wheel, you know? He said, you know, parents always find a nickel, I think it was a nickel to get on it; now I think it's like five dollars. He said they'll always find a nickel to give their kids a ride on the Ferris wheel. And he had been with Father Wilus doing the rides for him, like they had the fair every years, and, you know, I didn't even know he was here but they had a funeral parlor here. They had Costello's. That was the only place you could bury anybody if they died, there was nothing else.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have any other stores?

Claire Daniels: Well in Iselin they had little stores in town like food stores and they had a tavern, oh I forget the name of it.

Mr. D'Arcy: Jack Farrell's? Katz?

Claire Daniels: Kenney's Tavern and they had a little butcher but if you wanted to get groceries, like baby food, you had to go to either Metuchen or Rahway. Then after a while I found out they had an **A&P** in Woodbridge.

Mr. D'Arcy: And what about Inman Avenue.

Claire Daniels: What?

Mr. D'Arcy: Did you do you marketing in the Foodtown on Inman Avenue in Colonia?

Claire Daniels: No, I don't think it was there; I don't remember it being there. I remember my mother wanted to buy a house in Colonia and we drove her around Colonia and it was like open fields. There was like, you know, maybe one or two little stores but that was it. I'm going back a long time. I don't know how far back you want but, you know, everybody had the same situation. We were all young and we all had little children to raise and we used to borrow maternity clothes. Like if your neighbor just had a baby and you were going to have another child, you swapped clothes, you know, and everybody was helping each other fix their houses when the roofs leaked and they, you know, brought their own covers for the roof. All the neighbors got together and did it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's go to question 5 and that would be Deanna.

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

Claire Daniels: Well as far as post offices, in Iselin, they had a little part of the train station that was the post office. In fact, that Iselin train station, I think, was the one where the train went over at one time in history. I had heard that story.

Brenda Velasco: That may be 1951 with the Woodbridge (Train wreck) on Fulton Street, that awful train wreck.

Claire Daniels: Oh, no, I think this was way before that.

Mr. D'Arcy: There were these northeast spinoff liners; there were a couple of trains that derailed.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, alright.

Claire Daniels: You know, because one of the policeman told me his family was involved in that and he was probably just as old as I am. What was the other question?

Deanna: Libraries.

Claire Daniels: Oh, the library. After I was here for a while and I started to look for books for my children, I found there was that little Colonia library on New Dover Road and they had one woman taking care of it and she was very, very old. I forget her name.

Mr. D'Arcy: It wasn't Pat Cimmonino, was it?

Claire Daniels: No, I don't think so.

Mr. D'Arcy: I know who it is.

Claire Daniels: She wasn't there too long.

Mr. D'Arcy: Little lady with glasses, was it?

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Mr. D'Arcy: I'll find out and have it. (Mary Soule)

Claire Daniels: I can't remember her name but she was the only place you could go to. The only school that was nearby was St. Cecelia's. They hadn't built any of the other schools that I knew of but then I found out, when I started working in the library, that there were other schools in Iselin, old, old schools.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, now you worked in a library.

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Which library did you work in?

Claire Daniels: Well, I started in the Iselin library and then.....

Brenda Velasco: When was that built Claire because when you first moved it wasn't here?

Claire Daniels: Oh, let's see. I guess I was about forty when I worked there.

Mr. D'Arcy: Are you talking about the library in the Indiana School?

Claire Daniels: The Indiana School wasn't there then. (1958)

Brenda Velasco: So, the late '60s then?

Claire Daniels: Yes something like that. I don't really remember.

Brenda Velasco: That's when they established their library then. (Iselin Library – April 1968)

Claire Daniels: Before that they had a little place on one of the streets there were the children that used to live across from that little library used to go in the library on Saturday mornings to take their shower because they would bring their soap in there and towel and go across the street to the library so that they, you know, they had a lot of children and that was easier for them than trying to get them all in the bathtub. They didn't have showers or anything then that I know of. Yes, we did have a shower in our house, I'm sorry, I'm mistaken. They did have a shower in our house.

Brenda Velasco: Deanna, what were some of the other?

Deanna: Parks or firehouses.

Claire Daniels: They must have had a firehouse but I don't remember it. I remember like when Kennedy was killed, one of the Kennedys, and they had the trains coming through Iselin.

Everybody went down to the train station to, you know, see the train that, Joe Kennedy I think it was.

Brenda Velasco: Was it John Kennedy or Robert Kennedy?

Claire Daniels: Robert, it was Robert.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Claire Daniels: Because he was being taken from where he was killed to Washington. So they did have a train, you know. That was the reason, I think, a lot of people moved here was because of the train station and they could get to New York. But the trains didn't run very often. You know, you had to go by a schedule and if you missed it forget it you were out in the boondocks.

Student: What about parks?

Claire Daniels: Well, not when I first came here do I remember any parks but my children were all in football so one of the gentleman in our town started the Iselin Giants team and we used to go to the park and I even sold frankfurters for them there. You know, they had a stand and the children did have a chance to learn to play football.

Mr. D'Arcy: Was that Merrill Park?

Claire Daniels: Yes. My boys joined everything that had a uniform so I was always running to some game or another with them but it was interesting. There were so few of us that actually stayed in Iselin. I think I was one of the only one of four families that stayed. Now they have died or gone somewhere else. So I really think there are only two of us left on our street that were original owners.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so you're an original owner and we just interviewed somebody earlier this morning who was an original owner, Mrs. Lorraine Germek, but she's not from your street. She's from another street, 17 Bender.

Claire Daniels: But the houses were inexpensive and I intended to sell it along the years because as I said my children are all gone now and my husband's both died so I'm by myself. I

thought, well, I'd go near my children. They wanted me to but there's so much activity here that, you know, take advantage of if you wanted to. You don't have to be by yourself.

Brenda Velasco: That's why you're here at Evergreen today.

Claire Daniels: Well I do take advantage of lot of the activities that Evergreen has. Evelyn has been very kind to me when my husband was sick. Like, she didn't ask me to make a commitment that whether I could come to a luncheon. She'd say, we'll wait until the last minute. If you want to come you pay when you get here. I thought that was nice. She's been very good to me.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Julienne, question six.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Claire Daniels: Do you mean with the children?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Claire Daniels: Like we would have picnics and backyard get togethers with the neighbors. Then St. Cecelia's would sometimes have a Christmas dance but there wasn't really much to do. We had a little tiny movie in town but it was kind of one of these places where, you know, you had to be careful that you didn't get buggy going in there because I don't think they ever swept the floor. But, you know, they were cheap and we used to go to the movies. Oh, they had a drive-in eventually on Oak Tree Road but you're talking about the original conditions.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, the tiny movie house was right on Oak Tree Road (and Correja Avenue), you're talking about?

Claire Daniels: Yes, right in the middle of town. And they had a bar there and if you were a drinker you could get a beer. In fact, one of my refrigerators, I had a five cubic foot refrigerator. Imagine raising three little children with a refrigerator about this big. I had to go shopping all the time. We donated it to Kenny's Tavern because they started making pizzas and had food there so we had given it to them and when we finally got a bigger refrigerator.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and the drive-in movie was where the Oak Tree Plaza is?

Claire Daniels: Yes where the Shop Rite used to be there. My kids always left one of their shoes there because we would take the three of them in the car and get their pajamas on and nine out of ten times one of them would toss one of their shoes out the window and eventually I had to go running back in the morning to look for it. My husband used to go hunting on Oak Tree Road. They had pheasant there. They had an old junkyard with old car pieces and they had a locker for people that hunted. On Thanksgiving, a lot of times, he would bring home a dirty pheasant that I would have to clean in the middle of trying to make dinner. It was an experience.

Brenda Velasco: It was Green Acres for you.

Claire Daniels: Yes it was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Ayushi, question 7.

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

Claire Daniels: The focal point, I guess, was the church because most of us were Catholics and we all went to St. Cecelia's and we'd partake of all the activities they had there. Of course, the rest of it was our own backyard activities. We were so busy washing clothes and hanging them up we didn't have much time for entertainment.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's go to question 8 because the bus has arrived. Humza, we're back with you.

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

Claire Daniels: I liked the companionship of all the other families in the development that if you needed help at any time, if you had to take one of the children to the doctors up in East Orange, the neighbors would come and take one of the other kids and take care of them. I had a neighbor that had, I think, eight or ten children and she said, oh they just get in line and I put the food on their plate and whether they like it or not I'd say, well you don't have to like it you just have to eat it. She said they would draw a line, you know, so like she'd say one or two more doesn't matter. So we could depend on each other which was a good part of the whole affair.

Brenda Velasco: Especially when we would (inaudible) times or one time.

Claire Daniels: Yes, because, you know, I didn't see my family that often and the only time I did is when I had to take my boys up to the doctor. Their pediatrician was in East Orange.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Sandra, question 9.

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

Claire Daniels: Well at one time there was a train accident in Merrill Park where people were across the track and it was the 4th of July and that was one of the activities that we had, everybody went to Merrill Park to see the fireworks. In fact, this family that lived on my street, there was a father, son and the daughter and I think one of the aunts, and with all the fireworks going they didn't hear the alarm of the train and they started to cross the track and you'll notice now there is a fence there, and they started to cross the track and then when the father saw that it was a train instead of the fireworks he pushed his wife back and one of the girls but he and his sister, I think, got killed. This was really unfortunate but at least we got a gate there where we never had one before, you know. In fact, I remember their name was Sweeney. The daughter lived but I think we had a problem because she was hurt too, but the mother kept the house for a while and then she died.

Brenda Velasco: Claire, do you recall the year or how longed you lived in Iselin before that happened?

Claire Daniels: Yes I do, because my daughter was just born and I was having her christening the next day so I didn't go down to the fair with him. He was maybe, oh I can't remember how old he was, but Lisa was just born and she's forty-three now.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so it was about forty-three years ago.

Claire Daniels: Yes.

Mr. D'Arcy: About 1975, was it somewhere around there?

Claire Daniels: I don't remember but I know it was about forty-three years ago though because she was just born and I was having her christening the next day and he came home and told me, ma there's a big accident, but he didn't know who was hurt.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, about 1966 then.

Claire Daniels: Yes, I guess so.

Brenda Velasco: Because you lived there a while.

Claire Daniels: Yes, because she was born around '65 or '66, I think.

Brenda Velasco: Okay we'll go to Regina for question 10 and then we're going to have to conclude this because you have a bus to take.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Claire Daniels: Well like I said, there are a lot of activities here that I can take advantage of and like if I moved into the apartments were you have to pay every month, you rented a place, they'd raise the rent every year. This way I know I just have to pay my taxes and utilities so I'm alright. And, as I said, I have a lot of friends and anything that I want to go to is not that far. You know, I don't have to travel miles to go to a movie.

Regina: Everything's local.

Claire Daniels: Yes, everything is local. That's the word I was looking for.

Brenda Velasco: Very good.

Claire Daniels: You know, as I said, as you get older you forget even words sometimes. I mean names are bad enough but sometimes I start a sentence and I can't think of the word that I wanted to use to finish it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we'll then go to Kaitlin for question 11.

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

Claire Daniels: Well, my son is in the service and right now he's stationed in Virginia and he comes home every once in a while but he's been all over the world, in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he's been in Desert Storm and, you name it, he's been all over. So that was another reason I'd like to keep the house is because, until he starts a family of his own, he has a home to come to. They provided an apartment for me in Virginia but it's, you know, just a small apartment and I hold his dog for him; I've kept the dog for the last ten years. I've taken care of it.

Mr. D'Arcy: Whose dog is it now?

Claire Daniels: Yes, I wonder.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I thank you very much. If you can think of anything else or if you think of other questions, let me know. But I thank you very much.

Claire Daniels: Oh, you're very welcome. I was happy to do it. It brought back a lot of memories.

Brenda Velasco: Good to see you. This was my librarian. (Henry Inman Library)