

**Oral History Interview**  
**Edna Harkay**  
**WH011**

(written transcript only)

On June 4, 2008, Edna Harkay was interviewed by Brenda Velasco in her home on 58 Hanson Avenue, Fords at 1:20 P.M.

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

*Edna Harkay:* My name is Edna Christiansen Harkay. I live on 58 Hanson Avenue in the Fords section of Woodbridge. I was born on July 19, 1926.

**2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?**

*Edna Harkay:* I have lived in eight different homes in Fords for the past seventy-nine years.

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

*Edna Harkay:* My parents moved to Perth Amboy since housing was cheaper and there was a Danish population living there. They had previously lived in New York; Staten Island and Long Island. The Danes worked as carpenters, dock builders, masons, and crane operators in construction.

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

*Edna Harkay:* During the late 1930s, Ford Avenue was a dirt road going down to Route #1. There was a man by the name of Mr. Capconi who lived somewhere in the woods off of Ford Avenue. He had a horse drawn wagon to collect junk and would drive daily by my house at 173 Ford Avenue. In that same area was Varady's Inn, which was a picnic grove and restaurant. My mother was once a waitress there. Off Main Street, set back in the woods, were two ponds: a very large pond called "the ice sea" and a smaller pond. Many large ice hockey games were played at the ice sea. Folks came from all over to play, even from as far as Staten Island. They would come by ferry boat to Perth Amboy. The smaller pond was before the ice sea and was where the kids would ice skate. It was full of weeds and rushes. There was a house before the pond that sold fresh eggs. (Map attached.) Near the right side was a garbage dump and closer to Woodbridge was the police firing range. As time went on this whole area was developed into houses, a school, Kensington Gardens, a junior high and a library. Most of all Route 287/440 was built over the ponds and the Parkway that crosses over it. Another major change in Fords and other towns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the mom and pop stores and downtown grocery stores. In Fords, there were several. There was **Sisolak's Grocery Store** on Corey Street and Crows Mill Road, **Mrs. Kratky** had a store on Clum Avenue and Livingston Avenue near School #7, **Lukach's** was on Hanson Avenue, **Sisolak's** (cousin of the other Sisolak) was on Main Street across from School #14, a store, with an unknown name, was on Beech Street and Woodland Avenue, a **Butler Store** was on Ford Avenue and Main Street across from School #14, **Toth's** was on Ford Avenue and Wildwood

Avenue and **Joe Damback** had a store on New Brunswick Avenue. Most of the owners lived in the same building as the store. They sold everything from staples to meat, fruit, vegetables, candy, and cigarettes. **Lukach's** even had delivery service! During the 1940s an **A&P** opened on New Brunswick Avenue. Fords also had two pharmacies, **Puhans & Katz** and **Ferbils** which sold tobacco, magazines, and newspapers and had a soda fountain in them. During the 1940s, the first supermarket, **ACME**, opened on New Brunswick Avenue near Crows Mill Road where **Sipersteins** is now located. It only lasted about fifteen years. We would walk all over; one did not drive as today.

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

*Edna Harkay:* While as far as the post office in Fords, we had one which moved three times. It was originally located on King Georges Post Road at the five corners, then to New Brunswick Avenue near **Katz's Drugstore** and then to New Brunswick Avenue across from **Fords Jewelers** where it is today. The library was sponsored by the Fords Women's Club for forty years. They also owned, maintained and staffed it. Our Redeemer Lutheran Church offered them a building so they moved the library from Ford Avenue, where it is today, to Corielle Street. The Fords Women's Club raised \$3000.00 with the aid of the Lions Club and businesses for this building. The State Library assisted and taught them how to run a library. In 1964, Mayor Zirpolo promised to hire volunteers for the new libraries in Iselin, Fords, Colonia and Sewaren and I was one of the five volunteers hired since I had previous volunteer library experience. I also had ten years with the phone company and taught piano. For two years and two months I worked part-time and then became full time working thirty-five hours a week. We also had volunteers and super clerks who knew how to run the daily happenings at any of the libraries. I attended Thomas Edison College and Brookdale College where I was given eighteen credits based on my experience and testing. I later attended Middlesex County College but left four credits short of my Administrative Associates degree. The Fords Firehouse was first located on Corielle Street across from the Fords Women's Club where Miss Ruth's School of Dance is located now. The Fords Firehouse is currently located on King Georges Post Road. As far as elementary schools Fords had School #7 which held grades one through six and seventh and eighth. School #14 was grades one through six. Mr. Sharp was the principal of both schools at the same time. His wife was a fifth grade teacher in School #14 and used a wooden ruler. Also at School #14 there was a woman by the name of Mrs. Cronce who taught two grades in one room; second and third grade. We also had a cow farm, **Erikson's Farm**, which was located where the Methodist Church is located on Overlook Terrace and along Main Street and **Jensen Farms** which was located on Ford Avenue.

**6. *What did you do for recreation?***

*Edna Harkay:* As a child I would play with my friends behind School #14. We would play games such as baseball, red light or draw a map and hide. We also would have song and dance shows and charge a penny for admission. Mostly the girls would play with paper dolls and draw clothing. We also went to the Danish Home which was located on Durham Road in Metuchen where they had books. They would also hold picnics there on Sundays where I would dance with my father. I would also practice music everyday

at home, the accordion and piano, and ice skate at the ice sea. When I was in my teens I was introduced to mystery books when I was in junior high school and still enjoy reading this venue. I attended the Lutheran Church in Perth Amboy and would attend Young People's Night on Friday nights. I also would ride the bus from Our Lady of Peace on New Brunswick Avenue to the five corners in Perth Amboy and walk from Smith Street to Broad Street to where one of three Danish speaking churches was. There was also the Fords Women's Club, which I have been a member for fifty-five years, that was very civic minded and ran flower shows for the community with the help of local florists as judges, sponsored the library, had baking contests and concerts for the kids. There was a woman by the name of Mrs. Overgard of the Fords Women's Club who held an operetta, Rinky Dinks, at School #14 which included many of the boys from Fords. The church would also hold a play once a year which was performed one or two nights at the Mason's Hall on Green Street in Woodbridge. We had the Fords Movie House which was run by Mr. Lang. It was open seven days a week. The town also held minstrel shows there and at School #14, which had a beautiful auditorium, they would stage fashion shows, operettas, plays, fairs and dances for the March of Dimes. My mother would sing and I would play the accordion and Doris Perry was a gymnast. The Fords Fire Company was very community oriented also. They would run the sprinklers for the kids during the summer and have roast beet dinners. We also had Fords Park where there was a little pond and on the weekends people from Perth Amboy, Edison and Staten Island would come and erect huge tents, bring food and spend the weekend there. I also taught piano lessons to beginning piano players.

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

*Edna Harkay:* The small mom and pop stores. There were two gifts shops, one on Crows Mills Road which later moved across from **Sam's Bar and Grill**, which was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Grahmanns, where we bought gifts. There was **Katz's Drugstore** which had a soda fountain. Also the focal point of the community was the Fords Women's Club, the Fords Firehouse and the Fords Movie House.

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

*Edna Harkay:* It was a close knit community; everybody knew everybody, all of them. I married my neighbor who lived on Mary Avenue. My brother-in-law lived across from us on Hanson Avenue. I lived in eight different houses all together in Fords. I started off on Ford Avenue across from School #14 in the mid 1940s and then moved to Mary Avenue. In 1951 we moved to Hanson Avenue into a house my husband built; my brother also built his own home. My husband was a union carpenter and drew up the plans for the house. The building permits were twenty dollars for a ranch style home and twenty-five dollars for a Cape Cod. When we moved into the house it was covered in tar paper until the masons laid the brick. There was no mortgage. My husband did the carpentry including a built-in China closet and finished the basement. The garage became the master bedroom when my two children were older.

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

*Edna Harkay:* During the Depression the Fords Women's Club and Mr. Katz would give cookies and milk to the kids. The Men's Clubs such as the Danish Brotherhood, Odd Fellow and the Lutheran Church would distribute oranges, apples and candy at Christmas time during the Depression. We would usually have dancing following this event. During World War II, I worked in **Katz's Drugstore** for two years. They had a large mirror behind the soda fountain which displayed pictures of our local soldiers. I remember the soldiers with the tanks marching down Woodbridge Avenue from the **Raritan Arsenal** en route to New York City. At Our Lady of Peace, the military personnel and equipment turned to march down King Georges Post Road to the Outer Bridge Crossing to Staten Island, New York. My sister and I had wanted a double wedding. I was a Lutheran and my husband, Jim, was a Catholic. Father Grimes would not marry me at the altar with my sister so consequently I was married in my church and then participated in the wedding performed by Father Grimes a few weeks later in my living room. As a result of the highway construction, Route #287/440, the Turnpike and the Parkway, much land was taken away and some of the houses were moved. Our duplex on Hanson Avenue was moved due to the Parkway expansion. Other events I recall were the Woodbridge Train Accident and Moro Castle which ran aground in Asbury Park. My father took the family to view the latter.

**10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?**

*Edna Harkay:* I just love Woodbridge. I'm able to live independently here. The community was good to myself and my husband Jim. It's an established community where everyone knows you.

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

*Edna Harkay:* I don't have any who live in the Fords/Woodbridge area. There were five Harkay boys and my only surviving brother lives in Freehold. My son lives in Edison by the Edison Monument and my daughter lives in Colorado.