

Oral History Interview

Elisa Scutti Gurney

WH038

(written transcript and digital audio)

On Friday, April 17, 2009, Elisa Gurney was interviewed at her residence on 93 Spruce Street, Port Reading, New Jersey at 10:00 A.M. by Brenda Velasco.

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

My name is Elisa Gurney. I was born January 12, 1927. I am 82 years old. I was born in Port Reading and will probably die in Port Reading.

Brenda Velasco: So you never left Port Reading and I was told that if I was going to interview anybody I had to get a hold of you because you know Port Reading.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Brenda Velasco: So we've already answered Question 2. If you're 82 years old you've lived in Port Reading for 82 years.

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

Brenda Velasco: Why did your family settle in Port Reading?

Elisa Gurney: Well they never told me why they settled in Port Reading but I'm just assuming it was because of the Reading Railroad. Ninety percent of the people that settled in Port Reading, I would say, were Italians and they all worked for the Reading Railroad and that's what my dad did.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so there was already an established Italian community here and there were jobs.

Elisa Gurney: That's right, yes, there were jobs at that time. Like I said, I was born in 1927 and at that time my dad was working for the railroad.

Brenda Velasco: Do you know how old he was when he came to Port Reading and where did he come from by the way?

Elisa Gurney: He came from Brooklyn, New York. The little bit that I can remember is he did say he worked on the Holland Tunnel underwater there at that time, well that's how they built the tunnels, and that's where he met my mom. My mom was born in Brooklyn. They had some friends here that lived in Port Reading and they told him, after he left the Holland Tunnel job, about the Reading Railroad and that's how he came to settle here.

Brenda Velasco: Did he buy the house?

Elisa Gurney: No, not right away. I think they bought this house in 1941 or 1942.

Brenda Velasco: You were much older by that time too if you were born in 1927.

Elisa Gurney: Well we did live down the street. We lived in half of a duplex which is right next to the Center Bar there. My brother was born in that house and my sister. I

was born what they called the camps. That's where most of the workers from the Reading Railroad lived which is only, I'd say, maybe about a quarter of mile from here. Then from there they moved to the duplex here, this is called Hagan Heights, and the people that owned this house lived downstairs and we lived upstairs. They built the house across our lot here, that would be for their daughter and this house was supposed to be for their son, his name was Michael. He was the first soldier in World War II to die from Port Reading. When he died they sold my father this house. That had to be in '42 or '43.

Brenda Velasco: What was their last name? Do you recall the people who sold your parents this house?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, because I used to call her Mama Downstairs. Their last name was Tutin.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was Michael Tutin.

Elisa Gurney: He was the first soldier to die in Port Reading. In fact, they had a plaque for him by the firehouse for years. I don't know if it's still there or not.

Brenda Velasco: This was all during World War II?

Elisa Gurney: Right.

Brenda Velasco: Where were the camps exactly?

Elisa Gurney: Coming down Port Reading Avenue there are all those new warehouses that are being built there.

Brenda Velasco: Right, ProLogis.

Elisa Gurney: Well, it would be like towards that end, that side of Port Reading Avenue and up there.

Brenda Velasco: So you remember growing up there then, too?

Elisa Gurney: Well, not growing up. I had an older brother, his name was Dominic, and when we lived in the camps, now I was born in '27 and he was born in '24 so they had to come here in Port Reading at least 1923 or 1924, I'm just trying to gather some of that information myself right now. My brother Dominic was three years old when he died. The way he died is really bizarre. They didn't have garbage pickup at that time, this is the story I get, they used to dig ditches to bury their garbage and it rained one night and Dominic was outside playing. Now whether one of the smaller kids pushed him or what he fell face down in one of these ditches with the water and he drowned. None of the kids came running to my mother or father to tell what happened. If he was born in '24 and was three years old, I was just a baby when we came here to the duplex then. I really don't remember that early.

Brenda Velasco: How unfortunate for your parents.

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're filling me in on other information as well as we're going along here.

Elisa Gurney: Well you know what I'm doing, maybe I shouldn't be doing this, I'm giving you my personal history with Port Reading.

Brenda Velasco: No, that's what I want.

Elisa Gurney: You want that background?

Brenda Velasco: I want the background because everybody's history is different.

Elisa Gurney: But there are a lot of people who don't remember that either. Because of my age I remember it.

Brenda Velasco: And you've got a very good memory. One of the problems we have is that a textbook doesn't cover the personal history and there's so much tragedy but there's also good times and there's also changes. All it is is just black and white and it's not. Life is very colorful and it has its valleys and its peaks. So let's look at some of the physical changes that have occurred in Port Reading. Well you mentioned briefly the houses and there were camps for the workers.

Elisa Gurney: That's right there were camps.

Brenda Velasco: That's where the ProLogis warehouses are now. Then you mentioned you lived in a duplex.

Elisa Gurney: Which was here, it would be here.

Brenda Velasco: By the Center Bar.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, it would be Marion Street Center Bar.

Brenda Velasco: When did it start building up with the houses and everything?

Elisa Gurney: Well, during World War II, this was all empty lots here. All the new homes you see here on the street here were all empty lots. Then the township built barracks and housed most of the servicemen that came back from the war. I really can't remember the year that the barracks were demolished. Well, Jo Jo DeMarino was mayor then because he put these lots up for public auction and that's how all these homes were built here. Because when we were kids that was our playground. I mean that was our recreation and as far as stores we had, believe it or not, in this small area, we had three Mom and Pop stores; Rosetti's, Shredd's and Gronsky's. (Jo Jo DeMarino was mayor 1980-1983, 1988-1991)

Brenda Velasco: For an Italian neighborhood you had a variety there.

Elisa Gurney: Well, see Hagaman Heights had different cultures. We had Hungarian, we had Polish and we had Italian. But Port Reading itself, the bulk of Port Reading, was all Italians and everybody who worked on the railroad came to Port Reading.

Brenda Velasco: Where were these Mom and Pop stores located?

Elisa Gurney: There was one right up the street here.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, we're on Spruce Street right?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, you're on Spruce Street. It was on the corner of Spruce Street and Daniel that was Rosetti's store. Then if you go down the opposite way, about three blocks, that was Gronsky's. Then if you go towards Port Reading Avenue, that was Shredd's. It's been years since they've been closed.

Brenda Velasco: For people who come after us they may not be familiar with Mom and Pop stores. What did you buy in these stores?

Elisa Gurney: Well, what we bought was, the everyday staples. We bought milk, bread, lunchmeat, and canned goods. For chickens we went to Carteret because there was a chicken market there where they sold and killed the live chickens. Every Saturday my sister helped my mother clean the house and my job was to walk to Carteret and go to the butcher store and go to the chicken store and get the chickens and get the meat for the week.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so Carteret was where you did a lot of your shopping then?

Elisa Gurney: The meat and the chickens and stuff but for everyday staples like milk and bread and canned goods we went to these three stores.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, alright, and let's see.

Elisa Gurney: What public buildings were there?

Brenda Velasco: Well we're not getting there yet. How about houses of worship?

Elisa Gurney: Well, we only had the one here in Port Reading which is Saint Anthony's.

Brenda Velasco: They just celebrated their hundredth anniversary in 2007.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You were a part of that weren't you?

Elisa Gurney: Yes. In fact, most of us were against demolishing the old church because the old church held such memories. We were all baptized and made our communion and confirmation there, the whole works. In fact my mother was very active with the church with the (Altar) Rosary and everything and even with her legs all swollen with the veins and everything she used to stand here for hours pressing all the altar cloths and the priest's outfits and everything else with the starch. My mother was a very religious person.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, but the church is beautiful though it doesn't have the memories.

Elisa Gurney: No because see, once they demolished that church, we had to go to, well now it's not there anymore, School #9 to have our masses said there in the school for I'd guess it was about two years. Then they built the new church.

Brenda Velasco: Who was the pastor when you went to St. Anthony's Church, do you recall?

Elisa Gurney: Father Focci. That was when I was going to church then. Then there was Father Milos.

Brenda Velasco: And we have Milos Way named after him.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, and our new rec hall, in the new church, is named after him also. It's Father Milos Hall.

Brenda Velasco: So the church coincided with the Italian migration then too.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, the church has been here since back in the '20s. You'd probably get more history of the church if you contacted the priest there now, Father Smith.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Elisa Gurney: If you wanted anymore background with the church.

Brenda Velasco: But it's been a mainstay.

Elisa Gurney: Oh, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And you know we didn't mention D'Orsi's Bakery.

Elisa Gurney: D'Orsi's Bakery has been here as long as I think Port Reading has been here but the D'Orsi family owned the bakery shop at that time. If I can remember correctly it was mostly bread and rolls because I think at that time a lot of families did their own baking so there wasn't that much baking as being done today.

Brenda Velasco: Right, you didn't have the women working outside the home.

Elisa Gurney: Right, my mother was definitely home all the time.

Brenda Velasco: But you weren't.

Elisa Gurney: No, we went to work.

Brenda Velasco: You worked.

Elisa Gurney: I got working papers when I was 15 years old. When I was going to school I got working papers to work at the 5&10 in Perth Amboy at that time and it was just for the weekends. I started when I was 15 years old.

Brenda Velasco: How did you get to Perth Amboy from Port Reading?

Elisa Gurney: Bus.

Brenda Velasco: So you had bus service?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, #62 Bus. I think the #46 and the #62 buses both ran to Perth Amboy.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so you started work at an early age and then you worked in the Building Department at Woodbridge Township. (Building Department: 1963-1992)

Elisa Gurney: Yes, and I worked at Merck before I was married and then I got into the township.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, the Building Department of the township.

Elisa Gurney: Yes. I retired at twenty-nine years. (1992)

Brenda Velasco: How about schools? What schools were here?

Elisa Gurney: Well schools at that time, first of all, we had what we call the chicken coop. That was here in Hagaman Heights. It went from kindergarten to third grade. Then from there we went to School #9 and we walked. Now this is starting in the fourth grade. So we were, what, nine years old?

Brenda Velasco: Probably.

Elisa Gurney: Eight years old or nine years old going into the fourth grade and we walked from Hagaman Heights to School #9. School #9 was on well it's not there anymore, a little past the firehouse in Port Reading here.

Brenda Velasco: That was quite a walk because you had to go over the.....

Elisa Gurney: No, we didn't have the bridge then.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, because that's the Turnpike when you had the bridge put in.

Elisa Gurney: No not the Turnpike, this is the bridge here in Port Reading, the big bridge, what we call the big bridge.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Elisa Gurney: That's over the railroad tracks.

Brenda Velasco: Alright.

Elisa Gurney: See the Turnpike one is further down. That's by the avenues. See, the school faced West Avenue, right past the firehouse there, and we went there up until the eighth grade. We always had a policeman crossing us at Port Reading Avenue, which you don't have today anymore, and then our high school was what is now the Woodbridge Junior High School, that was the four years in Woodbridge High School.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, on Barron Avenue.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, we didn't have a junior high school then. It was from freshman to senior year.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have bus service to the high school in Woodbridge?

Elisa Gurney: Yes that we did because it was impossible for us to walk from here to Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: You might not have showed up at school.

Elisa Gurney: We probably wouldn't.

Brenda Velasco: Too many detours along the way.

Elisa Gurney: You know when you're small like that, especially walking to Port Reading School on West Avenue there, you think the snow was up to your waist but it really isn't because it's just that you're tiny in your height and everything else.

Brenda Velasco: You had quite a walk though.

Elisa Gurney: Oh yes, mom would pack the lunches and there was always a lunchroom down in the basement there for us to eat and they would sell the milk. It doesn't happen today with the cafeterias. We had no such thing as a cafeteria.

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

Brenda Velasco: What public buildings were here in Port Reading that you remember?

Elisa Gurney: There weren't any.

Brenda Velasco: When did the firehouse come in?

Elisa Gurney: That I can't answer. Vinnie was active with the firehouse; maybe Vinnie can tell you more about the firehouse. (1904)

Brenda Velasco: Okay, was it there when you were growing up?

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was there and in that location?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, it was basically always in that one location.

Brenda Velasco: How about a post office, did you ever have a post office?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, we had a post office, not where's it at now, God let me think now, was it across from the firehouse? I don't remember that too much. That too, probably Vinnie or Jo Jo could help you with because Vinnie's right there.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, he's right on Port Reading Avenue.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, right on Port Reading Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And we're talking about Vinnie Martino, the one and the only.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: We have to identify his last name here. Okay, and did you ever have a library here?

Elisa Gurney: Yes we had a library too, for a town that was predominantly blue collar. And I loved it because I was always one to read and at 82 still read everyday.

Brenda Velasco: I saw, when I walked in, the book you were reading.

Elisa Gurney: When my son sees the pile of books that I have that I still have to go through yet.

Brenda Velasco: Where was the library?

Elisa Gurney: That was directly across from the firehouse. It was a small building.

Brenda Velasco: Right on Port Reading Avenue then.

Elisa Gurney: No, West Avenue, it was really West Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, West Avenue. Then you mentioned the school, you called it the chicken coop school, Hagaman, where you went K through 3, why was it called the chicken coop?

Elisa Gurney: I really don't know but probably because it was just a two room long building, something like a barracks would be. I don't remember that too good but I know it was just two rooms and just the kids from Hagaman Heights went there because they were too small to walk to Port Reading so they had it up to the third grade but that's been demolished for years now. They just have a playground there now.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have any parks in the area as you were growing up?

Elisa Gurney: Just that one park, just that playground and park which was by the school and you go right up Spruce Street here and it would be on your left hand side.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, I passed it as I came down. So that was where the chicken coop school was, too?

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Not very big.

Elisa Gurney: No, like I said it was just, I don't even know how to explain it, probably these two rooms put together.

Brenda Velasco: It was small. How many kids, because you had....

Elisa Gurney: There weren't that many that went there from Hagaman Heights. I couldn't tell you the exact number because like I said it went up to third grade, and my memory isn't that good, when I was five, six or seven years old.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Well, you know what, we made our own. Like I said, across the street here that was all empty lots from my house here now, there are all homes built on it now, but that's what we did. We played baseball, out in the street we used to draw and do hopscotch. And basically, I know I did, there was a group of us that went to Carteret Park to ice skate. When we got a little older we took the bus to Perth Amboy and went roller skating. Where the bus stop used to be there was a roller rink, it was the only one around. Basically we didn't have that much, we made our own.

Brenda Velasco: And you did a good job. It was inexpensive.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, we went to the movies. What really is stuck in my mind too is that at that time that was during the Depression and my father would give me a quarter and we would go to Carteret. There was one movie house there. We would walk there, my sister and I, and they charged us ten cents each to get into the movie house and then with the nickel we used to split it. One week I got two cents and the next week my sister got three cents.

Brenda Velasco: And what were you able to buy with your two cents and three cents?

Elisa Gurney: We got ourselves a couple of candies. I remember eating the licorice, getting that, and that was our entertainment. Then there were Saturdays when my father had a little pickup truck and he would put the three of us in, my brother, my sister and I. We'd go to the Rokie in Perth Amboy and see a cowboy picture. Then we would stop and get a hot dog in one of the stores there. For a person born in Italy, my father he was very, very family oriented. I loved my father. He was good with us. He never laid a hand on one of us but he just looked at us and we sat.

Brenda Velasco: That was enough.

Elisa Gurney: That was enough.

Brenda Velasco: That look could do it.

Elisa Gurney: That's true.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, he took you out on Saturdays and then your mom stayed home.

Elisa Gurney: My mom stayed home because, my father said to me, that's her quiet time. Believe it or not, that's what I'm saying, for a man that was not Americanized he was more Americanized than some of the American people.

Brenda Velasco: He was very understanding.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, he was a beautiful person.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I think we covered quite a bit for recreation.

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

The only thing I can think of was the Reading Railroad because that paid our bills, not only us, but everybody in Port Reading. It paid their bills and put food on their table. That was a big thing at that time.

Brenda Velasco: How long did your dad work for the Reading Railroad?

Elisa Gurney: Let's see, he died in '72 and he was retired at that time, so he must have worked until he was at least 65 years old. See my dad not only worked in the railroad but he used to cut wood. He had a machine that he went around in Port Reading because at that time a lot of people had fireplaces to help heat the homes. In fact what we had in this house when they bought it in '42 or '43, we had what you'd call a pot stove down the cellar that heat the water up so we had hot water to take a bath and wash the dishes.

There were no such things as dishwashers or anything. You did everything by hand. But my father, that was like his second job to, like I said pay the bills and put food on the table. That's one thing about us here we never had any problem with having food on the table or paying the bills. My father worked, always, two jobs. That's what he did. He used to go around cutting the trees up for people. He had this large cutting machine that he hooked on to the back of the pickup truck that he had. Vinnie Martino and Jo Jo DeMarino could probably tell you more because when the kids would see him come with the machine they would all run out to watch him cut the wood.

Brenda Velasco: They didn't mind the noise or the chips flying and the dust and all. This was a good time for them.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, that's right.

Brenda Velasco: I know when I've talked to others from Port Reading the railroad was the dominant industry.

Elisa Gurney: That's what it was. At first, you know, when I saw that question I said, now what was really the focal point? The only thing it was was the railroad.

Brenda Velasco: Because so many people were employed by them too.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, all of Port Reading was. Like I said we were predominantly, until today, blue collar.

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

Brenda Velasco: What did you like about living in Port Reading which is your section of Woodbridge and you never moved out of it and as you said, you'd probably end up here.

Elisa Gurney: That's true, because basically we were like one big family up here. The parents would die and most of the children would stay and take over the homes. We still, like across the street, is the Rutilli family and Jeannie Rutilli is married and her name now is Jean Cheddar and she took over the house when her mother and father died, The DeSantis all stayed, the Center Bar, they're all the DeSantis. We were like one big family. The DeSantis family, my mother and father were like their best man and their maid of honor when they got married; and my mother was christened, Fannie DeSantis was her godmother. There weren't that many homes here so we were all like one big family; mostly all Italians.

Brenda Velasco: That was a nice family.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That was a nice community.

Elisa Gurney: We were close. Until today we still are the ones that are left because now it's such a change in the culture and everything else that's happened here.

Brenda Velasco: Right, but your son lives upset; he stayed.

Elisa Gurney: He stayed.

Brenda Velasco: He was with the Sheriff's Department you said.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, he's married twenty-five years and he's been there twenty-five years.

Brenda Velasco: But you've noticed that the children have moved back. That's a good feeling

Elisa Gurney: They never moved away, they really never moved away. They all stayed. I mean, some of them did, yes, but most of them.....

Brenda Velasco: Remained.

Elisa Gurney: When their parents died, a lot of them died too, even the children died.

Brenda Velasco: It was a community; you liked that small town community feeling.

Elisa Gurney: Right.

Brenda Velasco: As big as Woodbridge is, and you know how big Woodbridge is.....

Elisa Gurney: I had no desire to move, none whatsoever.

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

Now when you say Woodbridge are you talking about Port Reading or are you talking about Woodbridge Proper?

Brenda Velasco: We can do both, it could be Port Reading and then Woodbridge Proper too.

Elisa Gurney: Well when we go back years like this there was no such thing as discrimination. I know I never had it and I never had it in my home with my mother and father. They never said to me, well this one is no good or that one is no good because of their color or their origin or anything. I'll tell you the truth, until today I don't feel any discrimination against anyone. My mother always believed that you should always treat people the way you're being treated and so far in my life I've had a good life. When someone doesn't like me I just don't bother with them: that's all. You know, I don't know how to explain it but we didn't have like riots. I didn't even know what the word marijuana was when I was growing up. We never had anything like that, you know, any of the drugs.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, how about some of the construction that you saw because you kept on telling me that there weren't that many houses around here in Hagaman Heights.

Elisa Gurney: No, there wasn't.

Brenda Velasco: Then when did the construction start with the houses, because it's pretty built up now?

Elisa Gurney: Well all around here where I live those homes were all built, I think, it was '72 because I went to work in the Building Department in 1963 and I'm pretty sure that's when we gave out the building permits in 1972.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Elisa Gurney: Like I said, you know, this was all barracks at that time, but it was all empty land before we even had the barracks.

Brenda Velasco: So you saw Port Reading sort of explode with population?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, Port Reading and Hagaman Heights.

Brenda Velasco: It's pretty built up riding down Spruce Street right now.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: It's residential. Did you see any accidents or do you recall any accidents that happened?

Elisa Gurney: Not in this section, no.

Brenda Velasco: How about the railroad accident in Woodbridge Proper?

Elisa Gurney: Well there was that big train derailment in Woodbridge by the State Theatre where the Municipal Building is. But it didn't affect us here in Port Reading. The only other thing to, if you want me to bring it up, was at that time when I was growing up, and we had to walk to school, we didn't have that big long bridge that's there in Port Reading Proper. That just went over the railroad tracks. When we walked to school we walked over the railroad tracks there and that's where D'Orsi had his bakery too. That's where there was the pizza place. I can't even think of the name of the pizza place right now, but that's going back a good many years.

Brenda Velasco: That's going back to the '30s then.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, at least.

Brenda Velasco: And there was no bridge, you had to walk.

Elisa Gurney: No, no bridge, we had to walk over the railroad tracks. They had the gates, they still have gates today in some places.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

I like the progress that's been made. I like the Woodbridge Center because it's some place for me to go and spend money. I just read in the paper today that they're filing bankruptcy.

Brenda Velasco: They're filing bankruptcy and we have an opening for two stores next week there.

Elisa Gurney: Is it the restaurants?

Brenda Velasco: No, these are retail stores. There are also restaurants that are going up. The Olive Garden is still committed to go up.

Elisa Gurney: And what was the other one?

Brenda Velasco: The Bahama Breeze.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So they're still going.

Elisa Gurney: That's good.

Brenda Velasco: Don't forget this was, I forgot the name of the company that owns it but it owns many, many malls.

Elisa Gurney: Like I said, it's in today's paper. See, The Rouse Company owned it at one time.

Brenda Velasco: Right. When you were working for Town Hall, it was the Rouse Company.

Elisa Gurney: That was in the '70s.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, and then it was sold to General, I forgot the name of the company that bought it but they have many throughout the nation including Bridgewater Commons but we're going to a grand opening next week of two stores, Swarovski and another store. (Brighton Collectibles)

Elisa Gurney: I wonder what's going to happen with Fortunoff's?

Brenda Velasco: That I don't know.

Elisa Gurney: Because they're closing up too. That was a surprise.

Brenda Velasco: That was a surprise for a lot of people. That was a good store for gifts.

Elisa Gurney: Oh, I loved Fortunoff's.

Brenda Velasco: So you like Woodbridge Center and you like shopping.

Elisa Gurney: But you know what, still and all, I did like what we had years ago like Christensen's store and Jackson Drugs. They were all like friendly related stores. You could go in and they knew your name. They called you by name and you got to know them. Well, Albert's the hairdresser, is still there. I used to go to him years back. We had the movie house then; we don't have it anymore. There were a lot of good memories and I still have fond memories of the old Municipal Building. We were in the Building Department. First on the second floor by the mayor's office, and then we went down in the basement and then they just demolished it and put a new one up, but I wasn't there for the new one. I left when the old one was still standing.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, 1996 was when the new one opened.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, I retired in 1992, two years after my husband died.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and then, I remember, the Building Department at one time was upstairs.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, on the second floor. We were right by the mayor's office at that time.

Brenda Velasco: Part of the building was condemned, that third floor?

Elisa Gurney: Well, that was the third floor, yes. Well, the third floor they had recreation and that was dangerous because we used to have fire drills and one time when we had a fire drill they told our office and the third floor not to move because they wanted to just reenact that we all died because there was no exit from the third floor.

Brenda Velasco: I remember going up to that third floor for some reason.

Elisa Gurney: Recreation was up there and Housing, both of them were up there.

Brenda Velasco: That was there for a long time. Then in 1996 the new Town Hall opened and then they got the Engineering Department back in there because that was located at Evergreen in Colonia.

Elisa Gurney: Right, that was separated. It was too much. Well when they were building the building all the different offices were all separated, the Board of Health.

Brenda Velasco: Right. So you were there at the height then?

Elisa Gurney: Yes, I loved every minute working there. It was really nice to work in Town Hall at that time. That was another thing too that was like family, our office, and not only that people were friendly. Now there are all strange faces there.

Brenda Velasco: That's what happens.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, that's progress.

Brenda Velasco: Well, life goes on. Sometimes I don't know if I agree with all the progress.

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

Yes, my son, Carl, lives in Sewaren, he has an apartment in Sewaren. My son, Stanley, lives upstairs. He's been there, like I said, well he's married twenty-five, no not twenty-five, twenty-four years he's been married.

Brenda Velasco: You also have grandchildren around because I see their pictures.

Elisa Gurney: Well, I have two grandchildren. They're Carl's children because God didn't bless my son upstairs with children. I have Christine and I have Carl. Christine is married to Matthew and they have two sons, Jacob and Justin.

Brenda Velasco: And I see their pictures. They're adorable especially the youngest one on the floor there.

Elisa Gurney: Justine, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And they don't live too far from you?

Elisa Gurney: No, they're in Edison about twenty minutes away.

Brenda Velasco: The next town over from Woodbridge Proper, not from Woodbridge and not Port Reading because it's about a half hour hike probably to their house.

Elisa Gurney: Oh, yes, definitely.

Brenda Velasco: Is there anything else that you want to, oh, you know what, we forgot your brother and your sister. Where do they live?

Elisa Gurney: My sister, Helen, lives in Florida; she's in St. Petersburg, Florida. They lived in Edison and his job was in Edison and then his boss literally picked up everything. They did small tools, precision tools, and moved to Florida to St. Petersburg. She's been there forty-eight years because she moved when Chris was three months old. My brother, Anthony Scutti, was a police chief in Westfield, retired at the age of sixty-five, because he's now seventy-two and he lives in Monterey Beach in Lafayette.

Brenda Velasco: So you've got two nice places to visit, either St. Petersburg or down the shore.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You made out very well. They moved out of Port Reading.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You're the only one from the original family who stayed. Then your husband was also on the police force here.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, he was a lieutenant. Stanley was a lieutenant on the Woodbridge Police Force and Carl was a Captain on the Woodbridge Police Force and Sonny was with the Sheriff's Office with Spicuzzo.

Brenda Velasco: So law enforcement reins in this household.

Elisa Gurney: Yes, well from what I understand, my mother's father was a policeman in Italy.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Elisa Gurney: So, it really does go down through a couple of centuries there.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, quite a few generations.

Elisa Gurney: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So your mother's father, then your husband and your sons are both in law enforcement. That's three generations of law enforcement.

Elisa Gurney: And my husband's brother, his name was William Gurney, he's deceased now, was a policeman in Carteret. But that's not on the Scutti side though; that's on the Gurney family.

Brenda Velasco: No, we want the Scutti side. That's why I asked for your maiden name right off the bat. Well, I thank you very much for giving me your time.

Elisa Gurney: Oh, you're quite welcomed. Do you want me to make a pot of coffee or something?

Brenda Velasco: No, but I thank you and thank you for sharing your personal history.

Elisa Gurney: Oh, you're welcome.

After the formal interview, Elisa Gurney recalled how she learned to drive at age 15. Her father had tried teaching her mom by providing her with driving school lessons but her mother wouldn't drive. He then taught Elisa on his standard shift truck so someone would be able to drive the family in case he was unable. He was rather prescient. One day her father, who worked for the Reading Railroad, was injured. A fellow worker knocked at their front door showing the bloody sock and shoe and informed the family that Mr. Scutti had been taken to Perth Amboy Hospital. As a result, she became the family driver with the visits to the hospital.