

Oral History Interview
Frank LaPenta
WH057

(written transcript and digital audio)

On July 17, 2009, Frank LaPenta was interviewed at the Woodbridge Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 9:30 A.M.

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

Frank LaPenta: My name is Frank LaPenta. I was born in Woodbridge Proper on October 5, 1931. I was born at home like the rest of my siblings and at the moment I live in Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: Now when you say the rest of your siblings how many are we talking about?

Frank LaPenta: I don't think we want to get into that.

Brenda Velasco: No, but you had a lot of.....

Frank LaPenta: My mother had a very large family and most of us were born in Woodbridge and raised there. (18 children)

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Frank LaPenta: Actually I've lived there except for the four years I was in the Air Force. Then I moved back after I got married.

Brenda Velasco: So you lived here approximately your whole life.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, seventy-seven years.

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

Frank LaPenta: Well it's a little complicated. My father immigrated to the United States in the late 1880s. After marrying my mother, she was in Brooklyn at the time he married her, my father established friends with Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison was in the process of moving his operations from Menlo Park to Orange, New Jersey. Edison needed a person to live in a house and take care of it until he decided what he wanted to do with it; this was the house that Edison lived in Menlo Park when he invented the electric light. At that time my father picked up the offer and he lived in the house and was taking care of it for Edison. He then married my mother in 1902 and he bought her there to live in the house. In 1903, Thomas Edison came to visit; and he wanted to see my father's bride. They lived in the house for a few years and eventually they moved to Chain O' Hills Road in Iselin, just a few miles from where Edison's house was. It was very convenient because my father's sister also lived on Chain O' Hills Road.

Brenda Velasco: So your parents lived in Edison first.

Frank LaPenta: Edison's house.

Brenda Velasco: Then Chain O' Hills in Colonia/Iselin.

Frank LaPenta: They moved to Perth Amboy for a short period of time then they moved back to Woodbridge, Iselin really, and lived in the house on Chain O' Hills Road.

Brenda Velasco: Alright and then how did they get to Woodbridge Proper?

Frank LaPenta: Well, I suspect it was when my father got a job with the Water Company in Woodbridge and at the time the Water Company was installing water lines to homes and businesses in Woodbridge. My father got a job with the Water Company and worked there for thirty years until he died.

Brenda Velasco: We're talking about Middlesex Water Company?

Frank LaPenta: Middlesex Water Company, yes.

**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: So you grew up in what part of Woodbridge Proper?

Frank LaPenta: Right on Main Street. I was born on New Street and I grew up on Main Street pretty much most of my life until my father died and then we moved to School Street.

Brenda Velasco: Were there a lot of houses then at that time?

Frank LaPenta: Yes, Main Street was mostly houses and over the years they tore down the houses to make way for stores and a lot of the stores that are there today weren't there when I was growing up. Main Street was a cobble stone road. It actually wasn't cobble stone; they made up this tarlike cobble stones and the road consisted of that and there was a trolley track that ran down through Main Street there. The trolley tracks are probably still under the dirt. Then eventually they covered the trolley tracks and the cobble stones with tar, blacktop. They also installed the electric wires in the ground at that time. The railroad tracks were at ground level and back in 1939 they elevated them because they had some accidents with the trains. There was a bad accident there on Green Street when a train, at ground level, hit an oil truck so that pretty much determined they had to do something about that so at that time they raised the railroad tracks. Up until that time, they had gatemen which stopped the traffic as it came through town.

Brenda Velasco: It was a whole different streetscape when you were growing up.

Frank LaPenta: Pretty much. Some of the old buildings are still there. You can tell the old ones from the new ones, you know. There were no stop signs in Woodbridge, there were no one-way streets, there were no traffic lights. In my lifetime I saw them put traffic lights in and I've seen them put parking meters on Main Street which they put and they removed. I've seen a lot of things happen in Woodbridge. The Jewish synagogue on School Street was torn down and it was moved to Amboy Avenue. No. 1 School was closed. No. 1 School was the original high school in Woodbridge. It went from grades one to eight and then eventually they made it into a high school, too. Then they built the high school on Barron Avenue and the students were moved over there, but it also closed. The high school now was built on the former Woodbridge Racetrack, it used to be a racetrack where they used to race cars and then the high school they built before that on Barron Avenue was two sessions. They had a morning session and an afternoon session because that was the only high school in the township so all the students, once they graduated eighth grade, would go to the high school in Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: So you walked to school then. You weren't far from the school.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, in those days most students walked to school. They did have passes for the bus. People that lived in Sewaren and so forth would get a bus pass and the town paid for their transportation to school. But there were no buses in the early years. I have some pictures of history where they had the trolley car and they also had the horse and wagons that they would bring the kids to school in, stage coach.

Brenda Velasco: That pre-dates you.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, that pre-dates me.

Brenda Velasco: When you talk about the trolley tracks that were on Main Street, what did it connect just people in Woodbridge Proper?

Frank LaPenta: No, it went from Sewaren through Woodbridge and into Perth Amboy and I think maybe Rahway too.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Frank LaPenta: It had quite an area to cover. As a matter of fact, that's how most people got down to Sewaren. Sewaren was considered part of the shore at that time, you know. It was the *Riviera of the East Coast*, they'd call it, and they had hotels down there and they had playgrounds and rides and so forth and so on. That's where men went fishing and you could rent boats and all that stuff down there.

Brenda Velasco: What we're talking about is that this trolley was a main means of transportation.

Frank LaPenta: Pretty much so.

Brenda Velasco: Especially with a train station in Woodbridge Proper.

Frank LaPenta: Well the train was at ground level at the time and you also had a station at ground level. But within Woodbridge and Perth Amboy, the trolley was pretty much it, you know.

Brenda Velasco: And when we talk about later on when they had the bus passes this was on the public bus that the kids used?

Frank LaPenta: Yes, the public bus. It originally started with the trolleys. Lenny Lloyd used to tell me how he used to get trolley passes to come to school and he used to play tricks on the trolley operator. The trolley would have sand, they poured the sand on the tracks to stop the trolley, especially in the winter, and the kids would empty the box on them so they couldn't stop the trolley.

Brenda Velasco: Too bad Lenny Lloyd isn't here. He would also have a lot of stories for us. How about some of the stores?

Frank LaPenta: Back in the late '40s they tore down the houses on the end of Main Street and they bought an **ACME** and an **A&P**, but prior to that they were mostly mom and pop stores. There was a mom and pop 5&10, there was a mom and pop **A&P**. The stores still are there at the end of Main Street up near the traffic light on Amboy Avenue. Close to that they put an **ACME** in and then the **A&P** came along. Then they also built the 5&10, they tore down houses to put all those stores in.

Brenda Velasco: How about houses of worship?

Frank LaPenta: Before I was born they moved St. James, a wooden church, down to Amboy Avenue; it used to be on upper Main Street. They moved the wooden church down to Amboy Avenue and eventually they tore the wooden church down. They had the church there that exists now; the brick church, it's still there. The synagogue

that I was talking about was on School Street next to No. 1 School. That was torn down and they built a big one up on Amboy Avenue also behind No. 11 School.

Brenda Velasco: How about the Methodist Church?

Frank LaPenta: Well, the Methodist Church dates way back and originally they had a meeting house on Main Street up where **Publix** was. Then eventually, I guess back long before my time in the 1700s or 1800s, they bought the property from the Quakers who owned the property that the church exists on it now. They built their meeting hall there and they had the meeting hall. Eventually they did build a church of their own. (The Methodist Church was dedicated on September 8, 1932)

Brenda Velasco: Around what year?

Frank LaPenta: I forgot; seventeen something. I got all the information home I didn't think you'd ask that.

Brenda Velasco: Don't worry I can always look it up or you could supply it to me later. So the original Quaker meeting house then.....(The Quakers were deeded the property in 1707)

Frank LaPenta: The Quaker meeting house was on that piece of property that the Methodist Church is on. Back in history, the Quaker's wanted a piece of property for graves and for a meeting hall so their meeting hall was at the location where that old house is now. As a matter of fact in the basement of that house, part of the foundation for the old Quaker meeting hall is part of the foundation of that old house.

Brenda Velasco: That's the (Methodist) Parsonage then you're talking about?

Frank LaPenta: Yes, that's the old Parsonage on the same property the Methodist Church is. Then eventually the Methodists built their meeting hall and then they built the church.

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

Frank LaPenta: When I was growing up the post office was at the building right next to where it's located now. The property the post office is on now was the **Drake Family Estate**. That remained an estate for a long time and eventually the town took it and they built their post office on that land. But before they built that post office there they had built a post office around the corner on, what is that, Pearl Street?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, Pearl Street.

Frank LaPenta: On Pearl Street and then they moved back from Pearl Street back on to Main Street on the Drake property where they built the new post office.

Brenda Velasco: So it's been in several locations.

Frank LaPenta: Even before that it was further on back, on Green Street. The library is where the Barron Arts Center is when we were children. There was a library in Colonia that the people themselves built. They built it themselves, they raised the money, and they physically built the building themselves.

Brenda Velasco: That's on Chain O' Hills Road?

Frank LaPenta: Yes. Woodbridge Park and the firehouse, originally the firehouse on School Street was also the Town Hall. It was part of the Town Hall and the police building. The police were housed there too, until 1924 when they moved it to the location they are on Main Street now. Prior to that they tried to build a Town Hall

and a Park area, where the Park is located now. They put the foundation in for that but because of the flooding they decided to move it up to a higher piece of property.

Brenda Velasco: That was right in the firehouse then.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, while it was the building connected to the firehouse and they tore that down and the firehouse remained. There was a firehouse until they rebuilt it here not too long ago.

Brenda Velasco: So the firehouse has always been in that location that you can recall, right?

Frank LaPenta: Yes. The Woodbridge Park was fields (when I was growing up). During the Depression, the WPA built a park there for us; they made a nice park.

Brenda Velasco: They sure did. So the school you attended then was School #1 living in Woodbridge Proper.

Frank LaPenta: No. 1 School yes and No. 11 School and the high school on Barron Avenue which I had to leave when my father got killed; I had to go to work like most of my family. Eventually I did go back to get an education but that was after I got out of the military.

Brenda Velasco: What year did you leave school then, do you recall?

Frank LaPenta: Oh it was in the '40s, I don't remember.

Brenda Velasco: Did you go to kindergarten? Did they have kindergarten?

Frank LaPenta: Yes, we went to kindergarten. Yes they had a kindergarten.

Brenda Velasco: Because not all schools had kindergarten in Woodbridge.

Frank LaPenta: The first year was kindergarten, yes.

Brenda Velasco: So at School No.1 you went from kindergarten to.....

Frank LaPenta: Fourth grade.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, grade four.

Frank LaPenta: Fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth was in No. 11 School and high school was on Barron Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Which is now our Middle School?

Frank LaPenta: Well, at that time that Middle School was it and they didn't have a ball field so they used to use the Lion's Club who had a ball field down on Fulton Street there, what do you call it, the American Legion? The American Legion building was the entrance to the ball field. When they built the Parkway and the Turnpike at that time, they took that property and they converted the old house there that was used for the entrance to the ball field, the Legion hall there. Part of the property is still there but that's where they used to play ball. The high school didn't have a ball field until they built the school here in Woodbridge in place of the old racetrack.

Brenda Velasco: That's still a big piece of property where the American Legion is because it goes.....

Frank LaPenta: Yes, there's a piece of property behind it. I got pictures of my nephew playing with the high school band back there in the fields.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Frank LaPenta: Well, actually the park was a place where they had swings and see saws and tennis courts and wading pools and sandboxes and ball fields. Also there

were all kinds of crafts in the park. The town put on craft shows and whatnot. We would make things out of clay and they would sell quickly. We also would have soapbox derbies. We would make these soapboxes out of orange crates and whatnot and the town would take us up the hill near the Girl's Vocational School and they built a ramp. We used to race down that ramp and they had a contest. They would give you prizes for racing your homemade soapboxes. They also had dog shows. You'd bring your dogs there and whatnot. Of course, every dog got some kind of a prize or a medal or ribbon or something.

Brenda Velasco: You had to make them feel good.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, and the Woodbridge movie theatre was a very important place. We used to go there and you could stay all day. If you paid your fee, you could stay all day in the movie house. Especially on the weekends, the parents would send their kids to the movie house and they'd get rid of them for the whole day.

Brenda Velasco: Do you remember the cost of that?

Frank LaPenta: I think it started off with a nickel or a dime and then in later years it was about a quarter. Of course originally they didn't have like candy stands and things where you could buy candy. It would cost you a penny for a paper cup to get a drink of water and things like that.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Frank LaPenta: Yes, they did away with a lot of those things.

Brenda Velasco: How long was this show because you said you could stay all day there?

Frank LaPenta: Well, you could see the show three or four times I guess it was. They usually had double features and comedies and so forth and so on. What was interesting, during the war, they had what they'd call "dish nights" and it was on a Wednesday night I believe. The women would go and when you bought your ticket, they gave you a free "depression ware" dish. Of course, when the lights would go on you would hear crash, crash, crash because the women would have these plates on their laps and when they stood up it would sound like jingle jangle.

Brenda Velasco: Let me just go back, when you had the soapbox derby you mentioned and you said it was at the Girl's Vocational School.

Frank LaPenta: Which is still there.

Brenda Velasco: Where was that located?

Frank LaPenta: It's still there. There used to be a Haagan Dazs ice cream across the street. You go up a little further and there's a steep hill and they built this ramp and they would put these soapboxes on this ramp, two or three of them at a time, and they would pull a lever and you would just coast down a hill.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Frank LaPenta: I built a soapbox and called it "Lady Luck" and my brother was going down and we steered it with a rope. We'd find old carriages and take the wheels off the carriages, you know, and we'd make our own soapboxes. Of course the more wealthy people would buy special wheels and so forth so we didn't have a chance. But I remember my brother going down the hill one day and the thing tipped over and they said, boy this "Lady Luck". He went rolling down the hill instead of riding down the hill. But it was fun. The town did a lot of things for us.

Brenda Velasco: There were quite a few activities back then.

Frank LaPenta: Oh, yes. Of course, you know, Woodbridge was a clay mining area and they had the sand pits and the clay pits. They would fill them with water and the kids would use them for swimming which was very dangerous; a few of them didn't make it. We used to go up to the sand banks and play and there was ice skating on the pond in the park. We used to go up there ice skating and sidewalk roller skating. Years ago they had roller skates you would clamp on to your shoes.

Brenda Velasco: Right, I remember them.

Frank LaPenta: And we used to roller skate up and down Main Street. Of course when we were young we weren't allowed to walk the block other than in front of our house on Main Street. I used to like, they had, concrete sidewalks and that was nice to ride on; and then we would go over to the park and then in the old tennis courts we used to roller skate in there. It was a lot of fun.

Brenda Velasco: Where were some of the water holes in those clay pits that you went to?

Frank LaPenta: They were on the right on Main Street all the way up once you passed the underpass up along there. It was up along the right.

Brenda Velasco: That where Woodbridge Center and **Lowe's** is?

Frank LaPenta: Where Woodbridge Center is and **Wegmans**. That was all clay pits and sand pits. We used to play in there and there used to be a lot of springs. We used to take water out of the springs and my mother would say, don't drink that water in the springs because there's snake eggs in there.

Brenda Velasco: Well, that would deter you.

Frank LaPenta: She did it to discourage us but we did it anyway. Then we would go roller skating and also there was a roller skating rink in Perth Amboy. For a nickel, you could take a bus into Perth Amboy and go there. We used to go fishing and crabbing in the Woodbridge River and in Sewaren. We'd rent a boat and go out in Sewaren and go crabbing and fishing. Of course, bike riding was a big thing and we played in the woods and the springs all around town. It was fun. Up in upper Main Street there were woods and we had a rope in the tree and swing across the water. Of course that's all housing now by that lake up there by the pond up in the park. Another thing we used to do, there were wild fruits trees around Woodbridge, a lot of berries and fruits. A matter of fact, when they built the park they planted gooseberry bushes around the park and whatnot and blueberry bushes. We all thought they were poisoned berries when we were kids but they were actually gooseberries so you could actually pick the berries but we always thought they were poisoned so we never ate them. Another thing we would do, Rahway had a pool and for five cents you'd take a bus to Rahway and it was thirty-five cents to get in the pool. Of course, as children in those days we had no money so we would cut grass and sell newspapers to make money and shovel snow and so forth and so on. That's how we got our money to go to the pool. We set up lemonade stands on Main Street and maybe make twenty or thirty cents and then finally when we made thirty-five cents we would have enough to get into the pool. So that's how we got our money for the pool. We used to make homemade row boats when the park used to flood. I never thought about this but it was dangerous because we would make these homemade row boats and go out and row in the water at there. I remember, one day, as kids we thought tar would make it waterproof because that's what you used on the roof so my brother got the row boat

one day and he took it out in the park when it was flooded and he got the tar all over his new clothes. When he came home my mother had a fit. Well, that's another story. We used to fly kites behind No. 11 School and model airplanes and I remember the girl ball team in Woodbridge. They used to play ball and we used to watch the girls play professional ball or whatever they had. Then as kids we built crystal set radios and one tube radios. We had a lot of fun doing that. We used to get involved in developing pictures and, of course, we were in the Boy Scouts, we joined the Boy Scouts and we had Troop #32 in No. 11 School and we used to go hiking up in Colonia through the old rooms of the old.....

Brenda Velasco: Hospital. (WWI Veterans Hospital)

Frank LaPenta: Hospital rooms.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes.

Frank LaPenta: We used to camp up in there and it was like a day trip. Also, we used to go over to Perth Amboy and take the ferry over to Staten Island. Then I marched in a band. I used to practice in the basement of No. 1 School and it was called the Middlesex Fife and Bugle Corp. We play with them and marched in parades all over the State. We raised pigeons and during the war you were encouraged to raise chickens in Victory Gardens so we did that. We had our own Victory Garden and we had our own chickens we would raise in there, chickens crawling in the middle of Woodbridge. At that time it wasn't illegal. Of course you had your family picnics and you had your Fireman's Carnival on School Street. Every year the fireman would have their carnival there. It was a big event in Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: Where did they host that carnival, the firemen?

Frank LaPenta: Right at the firehouse in the lot right alongside the firehouse.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, an empty lot then.

Frank LaPenta: Yes and there was the road, they would close off the road; and they would have block dances and they'd set up all kinds of wheels and whatnot. Of course that got them in trouble because they were shut down because of the wheels, the gambling, and that was the end of the carnivals there.

Brenda Velasco: I'm glad you explained what wheels meant, the gambling.

Frank LaPenta: The gambling wheels, yes. Of course, there was a raid there one year and that was the end of the carnivals. From then on, the firemen would just take a donation, you know. Of course we would climb trees and across from the firehouse there were the fields where the old emergency squad was and we used to play in there a lot. We'd put these platforms up in trees and we had a clubhouse so we'd play right in the fields there close to home.

Brenda Velasco: You had an unusual growing up experience because, Frank, you were right on Main Street and you had all the amenities and then you had all the play areas.

Frank LaPenta: That's right and had no money.

Brenda Velasco: But you still.....

Frank LaPenta: That's it, that's how we did it. My brother and I we started a club called the Woodbridge Youth Club. The town used to let us meet in the Town Hall in the courthouse and that went on pretty good. At that time I was working for the **ACME** and I would bring soda and candy on consignment and we'd sell it there. The

club went along pretty good until a group from Avenel voted us out of office and that was the end of it. They trashed the Town Hall and that was the end of the club. We used to get the VFW to chaperone our dances. We'd have dances in No. 11 School or over at the Craftsmen's Club. We went on hayrides and we went horseback riding. We did a lot of nice things with the club and as individuals.

Brenda Velasco: Let's just go back, the VFW, so you had intergenerational there, VEW chaperoning your dances and you said they were held at the Craftsmen's Club.

Frank LaPenta: They were held at the Craftsmen's Club and also at No. 11 School.

Brenda Velasco: And the Craftsmen's Club is on Green Street.

Frank LaPenta: It was on Green Street, yes. Of course, the Craftsmen's Club used to have dances of their own. They had records and they played records and the kids used to call it them the rat races, the dances at the Craftsmen's Club. What the Craftsmen Club sponsored were called rat races. Also in the basement of the Craftsmen's Club there was a small bowling alley, they had one or two alleys down there you could bowl at.

Brenda Velasco: So you had a lot going. This was an unusual community.

Frank LaPenta: Then right next to us, Perth Amboy, at the Water Stadium they used to have motorcycle races. We used to go there and watch the motorcycle races in Perth Amboy. Of course, they cut that out many years ago. A lot of interesting things to do in Woodbridge; it was just a nice town to grow up in. Traffic was light, you know, and people were just more familiar. On hot days, you know, people didn't have air conditioning and they would sit out on the streets and they would converse with their neighbors and so forth and we would just travel around the community and take advantage of what was there. Of course, at that time, it was the Depression and nobody had any money so you did what was available.

Brenda Velasco: And everybody was in the same boat basically.

Frank LaPenta: Pretty much and on New Street we had black friends as well as white friends and they'd be sitting at our table having dinner with us. My mother, as big as our family was, she still invited the neighbor kids in to have dinner with us, you know. We had the Cherry family, the Chestnut family and I'm trying to think of some of the other ones, and the Deacon family were the three black families; we were friendly with in Woodbridge. They lived on New Street and I think the Cherry family lived up near the circle here in Iselin. A matter of fact, I bumped into one of the Cherry girls not so long ago. She said, do you remember me. Of course, it's been so long. But they were nice people.

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

Frank LaPenta: Main Street actually was because everything happened on Main Street in Woodbridge. During Christmas time they decorated Main Street. At that time we didn't have lights across my street like we have now on holidays. Christmas everybody would go to Perth Amboy. But still you had your shopping center in Woodbridge. They would sell Christmas trees on Main Street and they had displays on the street on so forth and you'd have you Santa Claus in your 5&10 stores. But I used to think what was very pathetic, as a kid I used to go the 5&10 myself and sit on Santa Claus's lap and ask him for gifts which my parents never knew about. But all the kids did that, you know, you go to the old 5&10. The old 5&10 was located right

there where School Street runs into Main Street on the corner there. Right next to it was **Choper's** store.

Brenda Velasco: So it was next to **Choper's**?

Frank LaPenta: Yes, that little street in between. It was on the right hand side. There's a florist there now.

Brenda Velasco: So this is where the activity was right on Main Street.

Frank LaPenta: Main Street or the park and, a matter of fact what would happen on Main Street, they started opening ice cream factories around here and bread factories and what not. They'd manufacture bread and ice cream and these girls would come downtown in their little shorts and with a tray and they'd walk up and down Main Street giving samples of ice cream and little loaves of bread.

Brenda Velasco: Are we talking about **Costa's Ice Cream**?

Frank LaPenta: **Costa's Ice Cream** and a few of them. I don't remember exactly the name of the companies that did it but I remember these girls coming in this little Austin car and a whole bunch of them would pile out and they would have these trays. Of course, we would follow them up and down Main Street.

Brenda Velasco: Why not, you were young men.

Frank LaPenta: And we would get two or three ice creams, you know, or we would get a little loaf of Bond bread I think it was, the ones with the dots on it. They would give little loaves of Bond bread out. A lot of interesting things happened to me. Then the parades on Main Street and then when they had the circus in town they would bring the animals down Main Street. They'd march them down Main Street. What's interesting is, years ago before I was born, my sisters talked about how they used to herd cattle down Main Street because there was all farms around. They had a lot of farms, milk farms and dairies and what not, and they had to move the cattle so they'd move it down Main Street and when they built the firehouse they put this horn on the top of it to signal the firemen to come to fires. The girls used to call it the cow horn because it sounded like the cows coming down Main Street. Of course, this is before my time. This was probably in the '20s when they used to do that. But there were a lot of dairy farms around Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, we had **Maple**.....

Frank LaPenta: Yes, Iselin had some.

Brenda Velasco: **Cooper** in Iselin.

Frank LaPenta: What was interesting my mother, when she lived in Iselin, she used to walk to Woodbridge, from Iselin to Woodbridge. They'd walk and she'd push the baby in the carriage and she said right where the Iselin circle was there was a farm and this farmer had a mean bull. She said she used to wait for the bull to go down the other end of the pasture and she'd run like hell across the pasture to get away from him. They say eventually that bull killed the farmer.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Frank LaPenta: Yes, it was that mean. Can you imagine walking from Iselin pushing a carriage into Woodbridge?

Brenda Velasco: No.

Frank LaPenta: To visit relatives. We had relatives in Iselin and Woodbridge and so forth, you.

Brenda Velasco: At what age did your Mom die?

Frank LaPenta: She died at eighty-four or eighty-five.

Brenda Velasco: It didn't hurt her, did it, to walk?

Frank LaPenta: No.

Brenda Velasco: Do you realize, I mean, she had all those children. What was it about seventeen or?

Frank LaPenta: Well, she had eighteen children all born at home. She lost three. One died at the age of six. She died from appendicitis and that was a story in itself, and she had another one that got pneumonia and died from pneumonia. The other little one died shortly after birth.

Brenda Velasco: But she lived a long time.

Frank LaPenta: The worse part about is she lived a long time. My father got killed in 1940 at the explosion on Port Reading Road. It was the **Raritan Signal Works**, the made signal works for the railroads, explosives, and my father was working for the water company at the time. His office was next door to the **Signal Works Company** and then when it blew up several girls got killed and his building collapsed on him and left my mother eight children to raise on her own. On the day he got killed, he got docked five dollars because he didn't work the whole day.

Brenda Velasco: Unbelievable!

Frank LaPenta: I got his pay envelope and that week they docked the five dollars because he got killed, you know, only a couple of hours after he started working. Then Social Security, four years later, came along and told my mother we're going to give you eleven dollars a month for four children; each child will get eleven dollars. The very next letter, I got these letters, the very next letter I got they said we're taking it back because my brother George made fifteen dollars that month. You were never expected to collect Social Security. The way it was set up is that you couldn't live on eleven dollars a month and you had to go to work so they would take it back. The same thing with seniors, there was no medical, there were no food stamps, and there was no welfare that was it. If your kids didn't support you, you didn't have anything. That's why people in those days had a lot of children because they expected their children to take care of them in their old age and they did. Throughout Woodbridge there were little houses behind houses or the basements were converted into apartments for their parents and that's where the parents were taken care of by their children. Today they don't do that. There was no money, there was nothing. That was during the Depression, too, when my father got killed. My mother had eight children without any help other than the boys going to work or going in the military.

Brenda Velasco: And she lived until eighty-five.

Frank LaPenta: Eighty-five, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And she did a lot of walking. Did she ever work herself?

Frank LaPenta: Well, she'd go out and be a midwife and she did some housecleaning but, you know, when you have all those kids to take care of, especially at her age, what could you do you know. In her youth, yes, when she was younger she did some housecleaning and so forth and so on and she did volunteer work.

Brenda Velasco: She was a busy lady.

Frank LaPenta: Oh, yes.

Brenda Velasco: Very busy.

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

Frank LaPenta: Woodbridge was an interesting place, a nice quiet place to grow up in. A lot of fields and like I was saying a lot of interesting things to do. As a kid I was interested in flying and it was available here. We had the airport in Iselin. We used to go up and visit the airport and watch the planes take off and the sandbanks; you could play in the sandboxes, you could dig, you could make play things and in the park, like I said all the activities in the park. You had a wading pool and down through the park there was a cobblestone brook. When they built the park they put a cobblestone brook down which was beautiful and we'd play in the brook and we would catch crabs and we'd go up to the lake and catch catfish. They used to stock the lake with catfish up there in the park. There was ice skating. There were always things interesting to do. There were always the woods to play in. We used to go and play soldiers in the woods and hide in the woods and whatnot.

Brenda Velasco: You could use your imagination.

Frank LaPenta: Oh, yes. I remember my brothers got in trouble one time because they were going up and to the woods to play and then my brother said if mom gives the okay you can come play with us, you know. So I came running and said, mom said okay I can go with you but of course she didn't. When we got home, holy hell broke loose because she didn't know where I was, you know. Regardless of how many children you have one is as important as the other.

Brenda Velasco: And your mother demonstrated that.

Frank LaPenta: Absolutely, and she managed to raise all of us. None of us went on welfare. We all worked. From day one you had to work and that was that and we educated our kids. We either went into business or got a trade or did something and we also took care of her, you know.

Brenda Velasco: She was a special lady. And you also liked it here because you said everybody was friendly here; you said that.

Frank LaPenta: Oh, yes, pretty much. Of course we had our little gangs. We had the New Street Gang and the Fulton Street Gang and what not but we never really had any battles or anything. You just belonged to this group or the other. You know what we used to do is we used to take the bus into Perth Amboy and walk the boardwalk and sing songs like in the movies and what not and like some of the stuff you see in the movies you're inspired by that, you know. Today it's a different movie theatre. Then it was like gangs getting together and doing nice things. Today it's not the same. You're influenced by what you see on the screen.

Brenda Velasco: And it does play a role.

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

Brenda Velasco: You mentioned the accident in 1940 with your dad.

Frank LaPenta: My father got killed and that was devastating because at that time your income stopped, there was nothing. My mother got two dollars the day he got killed because he was making seven dollars an hour which was good money back in the '40s and that was it, so my brothers had to go to work. My older brothers quit school and they went to work. Of course the war broke out at that time, in '41. My brother Al was in the National Guard and they were immediately called in and of

course he sent an allotment home and as my brothers got older we all went into the military. My mother had eight sons and we all served in the military at one time or another in one branch or the other, most of us during the time of the war.

Brenda Velasco: And you were in the Air Force.

Frank LaPenta: Well, I was in the National Guard before I went in the Air Force. I joined the National Guard back around '47 or '48. At that time it was housed in Elizabeth and then they moved right into Woodbridge. They built a barracks in Woodbridge up where Home Depot is now. We used to march around in the fields up there and then eventually the war broke out and I switched to the Air Force after being in the National Guard three years.

Brenda Velasco: So you were in the Korean War then?

Frank LaPenta: I was in the Korean War, yes.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else, construction, sport events, riots, discrimination?

Frank LaPenta: Well, I talked about that train wreck in Woodbridge. Obviously you know I was one of the first people at the scene when that happened and that's a story in itself. The story about my father getting killed and how my brother found his body and so forth and so on and that was a horrible thing.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, because getting back to your dad that was in 1940. Your brothers found the body then in the building collapse.

Frank LaPenta: Well what happened is that they were bringing the bodies out and laying them on the street, you know, and my brother went and there was my father laying there.

Brenda Velasco: How old was your brother at that time?

Frank LaPenta: Oh, God he wasn't that old. Maybe ten or eleven, somewhere in that area or maybe twelve at the most, you know.

Brenda Velasco: Still, the trauma and the shock and everything.

Frank LaPenta: The thing is, not only that, but you wake the body at home. We had him in the front bedroom or the sitting room we called it, and I remember all night long my mother crying and screaming. As a kid I was only nine at the time and just the horror of it all, you know, being at home, it was day and night, you know.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, it was twenty-four hours.

Frank LaPenta: Not only did we see lose her husband but she lost her income. That was it. Today they throw money in the window. And I can tell you horror stories about that too but it just gets too much. Of course back in 1951, February 6, 1951, there was a major train accident in Woodbridge and I was one of the first ones on the scene of that.

Brenda Velasco: Was that because of where you lived or you were on the emergency services.

Frank LaPenta: No, what happened was I was working and I had just gotten home from work and I was parked in front of my mother's house on School Street and Danny Lattanzio, a friend of mine who lived down the block, come running up the street shouting my name as I parked my car. He said a train just went off the track on Fulton Street down near my uncle's factory. So we got in the car and we drove down School Street on to Main Street and on to Fulton Street. There was no indication that anything unusual had happened in town. So we pulled up in front of the train there near Legion Street and I could see the train and this temporary trestle had a couple of

cars hanging in the air, there were like four or five passenger cars twisted and they had fallen down the embankment, slipped partly down the embankment. The coal car had slid losing its content along the way, the engine had fallen on its side, it was laying on its side up on top of the embankment and there were two or three car still standing. They never made it over the bridge. When we first got there I thought the train was empty. It was silent. The only thing you could hear was a hissing of the engine, the steam escaping from the engine. As I walked across the street, to get a better look, I looked down at a dead body lying right in front of me on the wall.

Brenda Velasco: Oh my gosh!

Frank LaPenta: As I'm looking down at this body this hook and ladder new fangled fire engine Woodbridge got with that high hydraulic ladder, which we don't need; we only had buildings that were three stories high. They got this big fire engine. It drove up to me and stopped and it took its ladder and put up towards the train. As I turned around this woman was coming towards me holding this guy just covered with blood and she's yelling for help, you know. Of course what could you do as a kid, we just directed her to the fireman. Then after awhile people started to accumulate around there and it went on all night long. As dusk turned to dark they turned on their spotlights and they were removing the bodies and the injured from the train. Woodbridge had a fledgling emergency squad at that time-one or two ambulances-and they were just loaded. They were swamped when they pulled up. My brother, Bob, had an old Army ambulance, he bought surplus after the war and he was going to convert it into a truck. He still had that thing so he came running down there. They had seats in it that he pulled up and they loaded people into it and they just took them to the hospital. The sirens went all night long. The Methodist Church opened up the doors of their church and they setup a first aid squad there. They setup emergency phones for the people and they tried to help the people. The bodies were all over town. They were put into the emergency squad buildings near the firehouse and they wrapped them with butcher paper. All the VFWs all around they had bodies. Eighty-five people were killed instantly and over five hundred were hurt. It was a horror for a kid nineteen years old seeing something like this. I didn't know what to do. The cars were kinked over Legion Street. They were hanging up in the air and they were kinked and the wheels fell off. The wheels were lying on the ground and they said some body fell out of the train then too. But ironically, I go out and give lectures on this thing. I had a bunch of pictures of the train wreck and in the picture I have the hook and ladder with its ladder up towards the train and down on the bottom is a body bag with a body in it. The first body that I saw was in those pictures.

Brenda Velasco: Other people have mentioned total quiet, an initial eerie quiet.

Frank LaPenta: I just heard the hissing of the train, you know, and then holy hell broke loose. The come down from all over the place. I looked up at the train and there was nothing and I turned and looked up and the train cars are lying on their side, the windows were busted and they were twisted and people were climbing up and out of the frame, sitting on the side with their legs hanging in the windows. They were so high up. People came running up wooden ladders trying to climb and it had rained the night before and the new embankment was dirt. It was a dirt embankment and it was muddy and they slipped all over the place, people losing their shoes and all kinds

of things trying to get up and trying to help the people. Eventually the town was swamped. Some woman begged me. She said, please, please take me home and eventually I left for a while and took her home. When I got back, I couldn't get into Woodbridge. What I did was I parked somewhere away from the train wreck and I went over to the VFW and then again they went in and I went back in with them. I stayed most of the night with them. Of course, like I said, as dusk turned to dark they turned their spotlights on the train and they worked all night on it, you know. It took a week or two to get that train out of there. They had to bring in cranes and cut it up and all kinds of things to get the bodies. I have several pictures of what went on there.

Brenda Velasco: That was quite an experience for you.

Frank LaPenta: Well that happened in October, I was in the Air Force.

Brenda Velasco: So October, 1951 you were in the Air Force.

Frank LaPenta: I was in the Air Force in 1951, yes. What was ironic was when I got in the Air Force, this is something else you won't believe, I was in Japan I had flown from the island of Honshu up to Hokaido.

Brenda Velasco: That's the northern most island.

Frank LaPenta: I went in the Airmen's Club, I sat down at a table, I got an ice cream soda and I sat down at that table and who sits right across the table from me is Mike Mansueto. Mike Mansueto his family had **Luigi's Pizza Parlor** on the circle, and he took pictures at the train wreck.

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Frank LaPenta: He's sitting right across the table from me, you know.

Brenda Velasco: Small world.

Frank LaPenta: Would you believe, ten thousand miles away from home and I thought to myself I'd like to see those pictures, I'm in some of them. He said, Frank when we get home, you know, I'll get you the pictures. Well I never saw him again until we decided to hold a forum. The Historical Association which I was part of, decided to hold a forum and invite the people back to volunteer who were part of this thing.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

Frank LaPenta: So what we did we invited a half a dozen people back and so forth and so on and I was trying to find Mike and I found out that Mike had moved to Alaska and opened a bar up there and he got mugged and he was pretty bad. So he left Alaska and moved to Florida. He was living in Florida at the time. So I called up Mike, his sister got his number, and he sent me negatives of the pictures. Some of the pictures he took, so I had them. He said, Frank I'll be coming back to New Jersey and we got to get together in the spring whenever it was and I said fine. I never heard from him again. And this was ironic, because we videotaped it, we put it on television, I sent him a copy of the videotape and I never heard from him again. Then finally I checked with his sister. He and his wife both got killed in an auto accident in Florida.

Brenda Velasco: Oh.

Frank LaPenta: Now Danny Lattanzio, my neighbor, that came running up the street to let me know about the train wreck, he and his wife both got killed in an auto

accident in Florida. Would you believe? These people that were at the train wreck with me.....

Brenda Velasco: We're not even going to touch that.

Frank LaPenta: Anyway, there are good and bad things about Woodbridge. I remember a lot of good things.

Brenda Velasco: Well you sure shared a lot of good memories with us.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Frank LaPenta: Well living here seventy-seven years you make a lot of friends. Some good, some bad. You get involved in politics and then you get out of politics and you realize one thing about politics, it's like the military. You got the Army and the Navy and the Marines. Although they're in conflict with each other sometimes there's still part of the United States and that's what healed our politics. Through Woodbridge, as long as you're for Woodbridge I'm with you. The minute you turn against my town then you got me to deal with which isn't much.

Brenda Velasco: No, but you're a long established family who've done a lot of volunteer work and made Woodbridge a better place.

Frank LaPenta: Absolutely. I'm a life member of the Elks in Woodbridge, a fifty year member, Charter member, I belong to the VFW, I belong to the American Legion of course these are all from Iselin. I was president of the Communication Club, my wife and I volunteer at the hospital, do fundraisers, we do a lot of things with the Historical Association, and I'm involved in a lot of projects with the Historical Association. We're constantly going. Plus the church, we volunteer at the church and do a lot of good things with the church. I try to do things at the Methodist Church to get the history known and try to save the last standing house on Main Street that has any historical value on that section of Main Street. We're working on that.

Brenda Velasco: And I wish you luck with that.

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

Frank LaPenta: Yes, my brother Bob and I have nephews and nieces.

Brenda Velasco: And there's also the Oil Company.

Frank LaPenta: That's another story. My brother Sam, when he was young, she started a vegetable business, he was a vegetable vendor. He used to sell vegetables along Main Street and prior to the Depression he got into the oil business and he put his money in the bank there where the Chambers is. Of course he lost his money during the Depression. Then my mother signed a loan for him and he went into the oil business. He started off with fifty-five gallon drums on his vegetable truck delivering oil to the houses and we used to carry it in by hand. You get these milk cans, five gallon milk cans, and you take two milk cans and carry it up to the house and you pour it into the drums. Of course, at that time, most houses didn't have central heating. They had kerosene stoves, they cooked on kerosene and we delivered to these houses. Over the years things developed and people started getting oil furnaces and he converted to the number two oil. My brothers also got into the oil business for a while and they got out. The LaPenta Oil Company still exists. It's

about eighty years old now and my nephews run it now. I don't know how much longer they're going to be in business with things keep changing, you know.

Brenda Velasco: You're absolutely right everything is in transition right now. Have we discussed all the stories and events that you want to discuss? Have we excluded anything?

Frank LaPenta: We probably have. I don't know what else I could hit on.

Brenda Velasco: You hit on a lot of topics.

Frank LaPenta: Yes, we skimmed around a lot of things, you know. There were a lot of bad things that went on in Woodbridge too but I try to forget that. I try to remember the good. Half of my family is gone now in spite of all the children my mother had. Yet none of us got in trouble, none of us went on welfare, all of the boys served in a military service.

Brenda Velasco: And that was eight boys?

Frank LaPenta: Eight boys, from the end of the 1st World War to the Vietnam War and my nephews served in the military. I lost a nephew he got killed in the Battle of Sicily, evasion of Sicily. My brothers went through living hell through the Normandy invasion and being wounded in France. This is a story in itself. My brother, Walter, went through the Normandy invasion and he survived that, fought several battles in France and in the middle of a battle he gets a ruptured appendix. And then he's told to march two or three miles back to the dispensary. He said, when I got back there the pain was gone. I said, the pains gone, the reason why the pains gone is because you're dying. They cut open his stomach and they washed his intestines, sewed him up and they called my brother Al who was home from Germany at that time to see him. They gave him a blood transfusion and told him the story and then they shifted him to England to recuperate. While recuperating in England they broke through the Battle of the Bulge. They pulled him out of the hospital bed and put him back into combat and he fought all the way through the Battle of the Bulge, up through Belgium and what not. Then they were going to put him on a..., he got captured and he got beat up. The stories he told me, the things that went on while he was in the services and then they're going to put him on a ship to ship him to Japan. Recently I visited him in Florida. He has all kinds of stomach problems and what not. So he went for a colonoscopy, now he's eighty-years old, and they said, where the heck is the rest of your stomach? Evidently, and while he was in the military, they took part of his stomach out and they never told him and they put him in combat. He went back and he fought through the whole war. You know, today, we got a little wound in your toe or something.....

Brenda Velasco: Today is a different time.

Frank LaPenta: If you don't like it you can get out, you can quit or you can go home.

Brenda Velasco: He contributed. He did his time. Okay, well I thank you very, very much. I'm glad we finally connected because you've got a busy schedule all the time and we finally managed to get together. But thank you very much Frank.

Frank LaPenta: Well if you have any questions of things I remember give me a call. We can talk any time.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes, we see each other enough times. But thank you.

Frank LaPenta: Take care.