

**Oral History Interview**  
**Helen Barney Derewsky**  
**WH101**

(Written transcript and digital audio)

On March 21, 2012, Helen Barney Derewsky was interviewed by Brenda Velasco at 11:15 A.M. at 151 Minna Avenue, Avenel. Helen contacted Brenda Velasco since her father Coleman John Barney was considered by the Smithsonian Museum of Washington D.C. to be a pioneer in aviation.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* My name is Helen Barney Derewsky. I was born on July 15, 1918 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I moved to Fords when I was like three years old. (Helen is now 94 years old)

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* How long have I lived in Woodbridge? At least eighty-nine years.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's a long time.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Probably ninety, yeah.

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

*Brenda Velasco:* Why did your family move from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Because my father learned to be a welder in Bethlehem Steel and the Depression came so my aunt and my uncle talked him into moving to Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, because there is a lot of industry.....

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* More work in Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where did he eventually work?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Some of that you'll get from the book there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay and this is from **Chevron**, the book that you're referring to.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* So anyway he moved to Perth Amboy and he started to build an airplane in the basement of his house. Next thing you know he had to cut open the side of the house to get part of the plane out and move it to a garage off New Brunswick Avenue across from the Perth Amboy Hospital. Well, when he started up the motor he had the entire Perth Amboy on his back and they said get the hell out of here you're waking up every patient in the hospital. That's when he went to Fords. That was Balewitz's garage across from the hospital. Then he moved to Fords and he took the three car garage from Dr. Kline off Main Street in Fords and that's when we moved to Fords.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you didn't have to cut a house to get an airplane out.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I don't know what happened to the house I was only a kid.

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

*Brenda Velasco:* Were there houses where you lived? You lived on Ford Avenue and then.....

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* We had to move because of the Turnpike taking over the entire north part of Ford Avenue. So we lived north of Main Street next to Varady's Picnic Grove.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where did you move from Ford Avenue then?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* To 34 Hornsby Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, now what schools did you attend?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* No 8 (14) School on Ford Avenue and I graduated from No. 7 School on King Georges Road.

*Brenda Velasco:* Your memory is good.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Oh, yeah. I do puzzles everyday to keep my memory going.

*Brenda Velasco:* It's working. Now how about high school, what year did you graduate from high school?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* 1936.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right during the Depression then.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I graduated from grammar school in '32 and I graduated from high school in '36.

*Brenda Velasco:* Now let's look at Question #4 again. We talked about schools, how about houses of worship. Did you have any houses of worship?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* House of worship was Our Lady of Peace Church in Fords.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about stores, do you remember shopping at all?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I would say about two blocks. I don't know how many but I know it only started from the beauty shop north past Fords recreation. There were bowling alleys and then the Fords movies and that was it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so let's go to Question #5.

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

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you have a post office?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* The post office was on New Brunswick Avenue. It was just like a store building, you know. Then there was the library.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was the library?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I'm trying to think where the library was. There was a small library.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, that was on Corielle Street. (Fords Women's Club)

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes, across from the First Aid building.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, good, good.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* And there was Fords Park which was very popular.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was that?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* On St. Georges Avenue (King Georges Post Road) near the Woodbridge borderline. In fact I took care of the park about two summers. We played pick up the.....do you know that?

*Brenda Velasco:* No.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* You put the nickel or penny down and then you go.....I don't know, I forget. Anyway, we were teaching that to the kids.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* That's it. The firehouse was there and the schools you got.  
*Brenda Velasco:* Yes.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I went to beauty school and then I opened my beauty shop; you got that.

*Brenda Velasco:* But I want to know the date; I want to hear you say the date. You went to the beauty school in Perth Amboy?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* On Hobart Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* On Hobart Street. Okay, New Jersey Beauty Cultural Academy and you went there in 1936 and you graduated in 1938.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Actually I graduated in '37. From '37 to '38, I worked for my instructor down in Ocean Grove in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Ocean Grove?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Down the shore.

*Brenda Velasco:* Down the shore, okay.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* And then I came back in September and I looked and there was no beauty shop close to where I lived. I went to Perth Amboy and looked at a couple of beauty shops and I didn't like it. So I said to my father, "If I take out a loan from the Fords Bank will you back me up?" I took out a loan from the Fords National Bank and I opened a beauty shop next to Fords Bakery (New Brunswick Avenue). They knew my family and they knew me so well that the guy did not even charge me for the building until I got really settled. He was just glad because the building was empty right next door. So I used to do his wife and his daughter's hair and they used to give me donuts every morning.

*Brenda Velasco:* Fine, so you were right next to the Fords Bakery then.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yeah, right. We were right next to each other and the church was across the street. (She owned the beauty shop for 6 years and then she married. Her shop may have been the first beauty shop in Fords)

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* The focal point was the picnics at Varady's Grove and also the Fords Park. They were the two focal points and the opening of the Fords Movies. There were three things that were the focal point.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Very peaceful and friendly people.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you liked Fords.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* But you're going to move out of Fords though.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* What?

*Brenda Velasco:* You moved out of Fords.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* To Avenel.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because that's where we are now.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* The auto race demolished, we got that, and the Turnpike crossed over Fords.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, and then what happened to your house then?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* They knocked the house down. We moved to Hornsby Street. All those houses.....in fact even Esso's house because we were here and they were here and Varady's Grove was there. Then they had a big farm, **Esso's Farm**, across the street; all that was demolished. (Perhaps Helen Derewsky was referring to the Erickson Greenhill Dairy Farm)

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* The construction part, you got that was the demolishing of the auto racetrack on St. George Avenue (King Georges Road) where they built the new firehouse, I just thought of it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was it a firehouse or the high school?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* No, the firehouse. From Corielle Street, which was a small firehouse, they built a big one on St. Georges Avenue which is still there today.

*Brenda Velasco:* King Georges Road.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yeah, King Georges Road.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* It's still there today.

*Brenda Velasco:* It sure is.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* The same as I liked about Fords.

*Brenda Velasco:* You know people and your kids grew up here right? This is where you raised your children.

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

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes, I have a son, Stan, and a grandson, Scott. They live in Avenel. The other one is in North Carolina and one is in Maplewood.

**12. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss that we haven't covered that pertains to Woodbridge?**

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Well, the only thing we discuss is my firematic family that gets a lot of reports all over. Everybody knows me. Even at our Dem (Democratic) meetings, they all know my family. You know my husband was a chief, my son was a chief, my other son was a president two years twice, my son Brett, the one in Maplewood he was a captain when he left Avenel Fire Department. So I was in the auxiliary; I'm still in the auxiliary. I was president of the Avenel Auxiliary and I was president of the Middlesex County and a life member to the state. (The phone rang and it was her son).

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay Helen we're back to your family. Now you mentioned you had a son who worked in California.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* That was Dennis.

*Brenda Velasco:* Dennis in California?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Now in North Carolina.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* They retired from **Chevron**.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, because your dad worked for **Chevron**.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes, my father got him into it; no my husband did. My father got my husband into **Chevron** and my husband retired to give Dennis his job. It's all in the family; we all stick together like glue.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, now I want to talk about your father because he was an exceptional person.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Oh he never talked about nobody. And you know what, let me tell you something.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wait, wait, wait, wait. Let's identify your father.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Coleman John Barney.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, who came from Bethlehem to Perth Amboy but he was famous in the field. He's in the Smithsonian right now. Tell us why he's in the Smithsonian museum.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* He's in the Smithsonian Institute listed with the pioneers of aviation.

*Brenda Velasco:* What did he do?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Do you want me to go back to when he started building the airplane in the basement?

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, we heard about the basement and he had to open the house.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Then he moved to Fords and he built the first Pacer there which he sold and then he also built this one here.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what one is that?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* This was the biplane. He built the biplane they call it, which this guy stole.

*Brenda Velasco:* Somebody stole it?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Yes, he stole it. And my father did track him down and he had no money. So what he did, he gave him a bunch of stock in payment for what he owed. But what happened when my father went to the broker he found out they were no good because they.....I forget the name of the stock, but then when these came to that company they came back as Santa Fe Railroad. When my father retired in '61 he asked me to come down and clean out the basement. I found all the stock there and I said to him, dad, you got good stock. He said no throw it away, they're no good. I said no I'm taking it home. I took all the stock, I called up New York and they said to me oh hell Mrs. Derewsky go..... they gave me an address, and he said make sure you insure it so you have control and send it to this company. They will issue new stock.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Well, I sent it in and they issued me new Santa Fe stock that I have until today.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow! Good thing you didn't throw it out.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Exactly. Well you know why because I was deep with **Chevron** stock, I was a big stock person. Until this day I'm a big stock person. Look

at **Chevron**. When my husband retired from **Chevron**, **Chevron** stock was only worth about fifty dollars and now it's a hundred and ten.

*Brenda Velasco:* Good investment.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Brenda, I don't tell this to everybody, you would be surprised I wouldn't be living in this house if it wasn't for **Chevron**.

*Brenda Velasco:* I understand.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* I'm getting close to thirty thousand dollars a year in **Chevron** dividends.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's great.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* And you know I have to keep quiet when people scream about oil and gas prices because I have to laugh underneath, so does my family. Because they say: "Mom I don't blame you for keeping quiet because no matter what the price is, **Chevron** is paying for it."

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, they are.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* My dividends they're paying for it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, it comes back to the stockholders: the retired workers.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* So what else do you want to know?

*Brenda Velasco:* How long did your dad work at **Chevron**, do you remember?

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* My dad worked eight years in **Chevron**. He retired in '61, I think.

*Brenda Velasco:* And he's one of the pioneers in aviation. In 1927, it says he flew a plane that he built for the Department of Commerce at Roosevelt Field, wow! So we're looking at an article from *Cal Oiler*, that's the publication for **Chevron Oil**.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* On the back of one of them will have when he.....oh here. He retired in '61. (The Pacer crashed in 1928. He invented the loop with the single wing closed up. He also flew the plane at Hadley Airport. The article also mentioned that Coleman Barney played the violin which he had built)

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay and this is from the magazine Volume 6 Number 2 from February, 1961. It talks about it.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Right, and then when the airplane, like it says there, fell through he went to work for **Barber Asphalt** as a welder. **Barber Asphalt** sold out to **Chevron**. So he worked a few years for **Barber Asphalt**, I forgot about that, then he went over to **Chevron** and in **Chevron** he worked eight years I think. So all together he worked as a welder. But he never spoke against anybody and they thought the world of him. (It was a total of 28 years with combined employment at **Barber** and **Chevron**; his service also spanned the years of WWII)

*Brenda Velasco:* We're very, very fortunate.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Now let me give you an example. Let's say you're my father and I have a problem in school and when I come home I say you know what happened today. He'd say what happened today, honey? And I'd say we were going to get into a fight. And he said what did you do?

*Brenda Velasco:* He was smart.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* That always was his question. He'd say it takes two to fight and two to argue and I'd say what could I have done, dad? Walk away, he'd say.

*Brenda Velasco:* He gave you good advice. Now we're going to have to end the interview so Helen, thank you, thank you, thank you.

*Helen Barney Derewsky:* Don't mention it.

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After the recorded interview, Helen Derewsky also showed me her father's front page obituary in the *Perth Amboy Evening News*, February 21, 1970. In the obit, it discussed his accomplishments in aviation. She also mentioned that her father gave \$1.00 airplane rides in Woodbridge (field near the present location of Woodbridge Center).

Ernie Pyle, a journalist in the Hall of Fame, wrote his first byline for Coleman J. Barney of New Jersey. The Pacer was used for air mail.

Mr. Ed Lawler of the Smithsonian took her father's papers for the museum since he was a pioneer in aviation.

Later, Helen recalled that she worked 30 years; 20 years in real estate for the **Bertagna Agency** on Route 9 and a restaurant the owner later opened on Route 9. She also went to Iselin and managed the **Royal Crest** for Joan Perricone.