

Oral History Interview
Helen Kovacs Nash
WH010

(written transcript and cassette tape)

On May 12, 2008, Helen Nash was interviewed by Brenda Velasco at the Woodbridge Community Center at 1:50 P.M.

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

Helen Nash: My name is Helen (Kovacs) Nash. I am from the Fords section of Woodbridge. I was born in 1923.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Helen Nash: I have lived in Fords practically all my life except for one year in Boston during World War II and three years in Jersey City when my husband worked at the Marion Station of Public Service Electric and Gas Company. After that, I returned to Fords when my husband worked at the Sewaren Generating Station of Public Service and Gas Company.

Brenda Velasco: So basically you fit our requirements, you are over sixty-five years old and have lived in Woodbridge Township at least fifty-five years.

3. Why did your family originally move to Woodbridge?

Helen Nash: They had come from Hungary and settled in the Fords section. My two grandmothers lived on the same street, Woodland Avenue, where I was born. My aunts lived there too. We've been in Fords all that while.

Brenda Velasco: Was there a Hungarian community?

Helen Nash: Yes, there was. There was a Hungarian community that came out to Keasbey, Fords and Carteret I believe it was.

Brenda Velasco: Is there still a Hungarian cemetery?

Helen Nash: Yes, Our Lady of Hungary Cemetery which I think is located in the Hopelawn section. We went to Our Lady of Hungary Church in Perth Amboy until the bishop had sent a priest to Our Lady of Peace. Then all the Hungarians started going to Our Lady of Peace because it was in Fords.

Brenda Velasco: Our Lady of Peace is located in Edison and Woodbridge on New Brunswick Avenue?

Helen Nash: Yes, on the corner of Ford Avenue.

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

Helen Nash: There were many changes. **Our Lady of Peace Church** stayed where it was except it was in a small wooden building across the street from where it is now. Then they built it across Amboy Avenue actually. That is a school now and they built the main church right on the corner of Ford Avenue. Alongside Ford Avenue, there was a large home where the old bank was and there was a big tree in the front and the little **Post Office** was right next to that. The **Lutheran Church** was where it is located now but it

was a wooden building. That wooden building was brought over to Corrielle Street and is now the Woman's Club; it used to be the library also. Then the library was built on Ford Avenue, the other end. When it opened up, I found many books with my name on them when we used to sign in at the old library indicating that I did go to the library quite a bit. (1972)

Brenda Velasco: How long was the library run by the Fords Women's Club? They provided the only library in Fords?

Helen Nash: It was just the Fords Library. It's just that when the Lutheran Church was built, the old building was just empty and then it became the library. After the library emptied out, the Fords Women's Club held their meetings there. Right across the street used to be the firehouse and **Miss Ruth's Dancing Center** was next to it. There were a lot of taverns in Fords. Coming up New Brunswick Avenue, where the **Dunkin Donuts** is, there was the **Westlake Garage**. Right next to that was a tavern but I don't remember the name. Then there was **Egan's Confectionary Store**. Everyone picked up their newspapers there and little candies and it had a soda fountain. For a short while there was a bowling alley but that burned down. There was also a movie theater but it's nothing now. Mr. Lang owned the movie theatre. My children and I would attend the movies there. Any child who made noise was told by Mr. Lang to "get out" but the child would just move and sit in the back. For a dime we would see newsreels, coming attractions, a serial and two features. After the movie house, there was **Mitruska's Funeral Home**, some homes and **Thompson's Hardware Store**; there were two hardware stores on New Brunswick Avenue. Going across the street from there was the Gross building which was just renovated and next to that was another tavern, **Myer's Tavern**. Next door from there was a drugstore named Buckley's and next to **Herner's Barbershop** was **James Butler** which was owned by Mr. Dambach. **Katz's Drugstore** went through many changes; it used to be a soda fountain where kids would hang out. There were two dentists on the same block, Dr. Deutsch and Dr. O'Neill. **Metzger's 5&10** was located there also. I worked there for a short while which was a great experience.

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

Brenda Velasco: Was the Post Office in the location it is now?

Helen Nash: No, there were two buildings where the bank is now. We would pick up our mail; everybody had a mailbox. We had a Lutheran Church and a Catholic Church. I don't know when the Presbyterian Church came on Hoy Avenue. We were not familiar since we stayed in our own neighborhoods. King Georges Road was all residential. The store, which is on Mary Street now, was there when I was a child. Beyond was called "the woods" towards **Fords Park** which was much bigger than it is now. When they made the Turnpike and the Parkway many trees were cut down. Gordon Avenue, where I lived, also was cut apart. Some of the houses were moved to different parts of Fords. My son delivered newspapers to some of the homes near Fords Park, where a duck or goose would attack him. These houses were removed when the Turnpike and Parkway were built. Baseball games were always played at that park. I was a team mother for the Fords Clara Barton. The parades were huge with mostly all young boys; girls were not allowed to play baseball in the 1950s. (Her son was born in 1947).

I graduated from Woodbridge High School at the age of sixteen. I also attended Our Lady of Peace elementary school.

6. *What did you do for recreation?*

Helen Nash: We went to the movies, church activities, and the library. We played in the street in front of the house. The games we played were jump rope, jacks, tag, duck on a rock, and baseball with the kids. It was like a neighborhood. We walked everywhere. I never had a bike though my brother had a bike since he delivered the newspapers. We listened to the radio, Lux Theater was on. Even tennis was on the radio. We had a large yard and grew fruits and vegetables. We only went to the store for other items such as bread.

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

Helen Nash: Home, church and family. I was really close to family. We ate together and shopped together. My father had a car and the greatest thing was to go for a Sunday car ride with the family. We used to go to Walker Gordon, in the Princeton area, to milk cows and we picnicked. We would also pick mushrooms and eat greasy bread, which was a Hungarian dish. We would build a fire and the fathers would place meaty and fatty bacon on a stick and roast it and we would spread the grease on rye bread. Families also would roast pigs. The European food that we would eat was stuffed cabbage, chicken soup with noodles, and goulash. On Sundays my mother would make a sponge cake and we would take the cream from the milk, pick the strawberries in the back and have strawberry short cake. There were no malls then. We would go to Perth Amboy, “the big city”, for the markets. In wintertime we did some canning/preserving. We had big barrels in the sheds for cabbage and I would stomp on the cabbage. We had a variety of grape arbors and fruit trees, grapes, apples, peaches, pears, plums, and cherries. It was like a farm.

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

Helen Nash: It was just family oriented; that’s where the family lived. We lived in Fords during the Depression. My mother lost the house because of the Depression. We temporarily rented a house on Mary Street and then moved to Summit Avenue where School #14 was in our backyard. All my friends from grammar school and high school lived in Fords. One of my friends, who I knew from childhood and was four years older than me, married my uncle. She also lived in Fords. I met my husband on the school bus when we were in Woodbridge High School. He lived in Fords also but on another street. We married in 1945 and moved to Boston for a year because he was in the Navy. We then moved to Jersey City where my husband worked for Public Service Electric and Gas Company. We were one block from Bayonne: the Greenville section. We returned to Fords when my husband was transferred to the Sewaren Generating Station. We just never moved out of Fords. My husband lived on another street and I met him on the school bus going to Woodbridge High School. When my husband passed away I put an addition on the house and remained in Fords even though my daughter lives in Mendham and my son lives in South Orange. This is where I want to stay.

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

Helen Nash: There was big snow storm in 1947 when my son was born. The snow was up to our hips. We were at Midnight Mass at Our Lady of Peace Church when I started experiencing labor pain. My sister and brother-in-law were with me. My father and mother were at another church in Edison, St. Margaret Mary I believe it was called, where my father sang in the choir. My sister made me tea, my uncle came over and we waited for my mother and father to come home. When they got home we rode to St. Peter's Hospital at about 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. where my son was born on Christmas Day. I came home on New Year's Day after a stay of ten days. We went back to Jersey City but my youngest daughter was also born here. She still lives in Fords. It's like a hometown. We just love this place. When the train accident happened my father went but we were not allowed to go. My father talked about the explosion in Morgan. As far as sports events, we were all sports minded. Everyone followed the Woodbridge High School football team. We always went to the games. As far as construction, it was something when they built the bowling alley on New Brunswick Avenue. That was something we had never had in Fords. That was a good place for us to go. We also went skating in Perth Amboy when we were high school age. It was upstairs on New Brunswick Avenue near Elm Street. When I was a youngster, we used to have snow by Thanksgiving time and we would go sledding in the big fields at the end of Wildwood Avenue. It was called Bloom fields and we would also go ice skating on a pond that was around that area. Another thing we used to do was go to Roosevelt Park. We would go swimming in the pond at Roosevelt Park and walk up Grandview Avenue. The other thing we always did was have picnics at Varady's Farm, where all those homes are built now by the Off Track Betting place, across from Lafayette School #25. Ford Avenue by #14 School was just a dirt road and you would just walk up to the picnic. We also had picnics on the corner of Mary Avenue and Woodland Avenue. It was a wooded area and we had music. That was where everybody congregated and the town was the center of the community. It was little things that were happening locally. We enjoyed ourselves and knew all the people.

Brenda Velasco: Your identity was to Fords more than Woodbridge?

Helen Nash: Yes, oh yes.

Brenda Velasco: Which is unique to Woodbridge because we are made up of ten different areas.

Helen Nash: Yes, we were closer to Hopelawn and Keasbey which was small but it had a lot more houses at that time. I know if I went through Keasbey now, I wouldn't even find my way back because it's like an open highway. I can also remember my grandfather going to work at the clay banks down there. We would walk there and bring him his lunch. You did a lot of walking then. Nobody ever thought of getting in cars. We didn't have cars and as far as bikes, only boys had bikes. Maybe that was to deliver newspapers or something like that. We didn't do it for recreation like the kids now. We just walked everywhere, to church and to school. I took a bus to go to Woodbridge High School.

Brenda Velasco: Made you healthy

Helen Nash: I don't think anyone was unhealthy. Everyone had good color and good complexions. It was a fun time to live. We talk about it and say we had a lot of fun.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Helen Nash: Woodbridge meaning Fords. It was family oriented and still is today. One time one of the nuns in the school had a cold and I was the treasurer of the PTA at that time and they needed substitutes so the principal asked if I would be interested in teaching. That is when I went back to school, to Rutgers University, and got my degree. From then I never left; I enjoyed being in those surroundings. It was five minutes away from home and my children attended that school. It was a perfect place. I taught at Our Lady of Peace for twenty-nine years and retired when I was 65. The school itself has changed now. When I went there the rooms were at the top of the building above the church and when I was a student there, there were only four classrooms with each classroom having combined grades. We had the sisters of Notre Dame; they were excellent teachers. My brother was in the same class with me one year because I caught up with him and skipped a grade. We had a great time going there. I think it was Father Grimes who decided to build the new church we go to now. It's still very family oriented. The church would have picnics at Varady's Grove and the women would do baking. So it was not only a family place to go to but a community and a church place to go to. There was a lot of community. When my children went to school there, there were three classes for every grade. The annex was built for kindergarten children and 7th and 8th grade students. My son's class (grade) had 103 kids. They were scholars; really good students. They really amounted to something. At that time we had the Sisters of St. Joseph and the schools were really crowded.

Brenda Velasco: How many were in a class?

Helen Nash: The classes were forty-five to fifty students. We managed to maintain order. There were no problems with discipline. It is a whole different world now. I don't know if I could teach now. I was a hugger and toucher and the kids expected that. It was so great because you knew everybody's name, you knew the parents and the conferences you would have. I would love to go back. I loved teaching reading. My primary grades for twenty-one years, was middle school/junior high at the time and then two years sixth grade LA, social studies and your own home room. Then they decided to departmentalize and I was the reading coordinator so I went up to the eighth grade when I left. I absolutely loved it. I had them for four years.

Brenda Velasco: You saw them mature.

Helen Nash: I have many happy memories.

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

Helen Nash: I have one daughter in Fords, my aunt, my sister-in-law and some of my friends from childhood are still here. We belong to the Altar Rosary Society and the Fords/Keasbey Seniors. We are still active. You have many of the same friends and you remember many of the people who came in. I enjoy being with the people in Fords. I never left Fords. I intend to stay here. This is why I put an extension on my house so it is equipped in case I become more handicapped than I am.

Helen Nash: I had Councilman Dalina in second grade and also taught Councilman James Carroll's son. I had so many children in school that no matter where I go there is somebody I know. It is a warm place to be and I love being here.

Flynn's Funeral Parlor was a doctor's house.