

**Oral History Interview**  
**James Edward Patten**  
**WH089**

(written transcript and digital audio)

On October 6, 2010, James Edward Patten was interviewed at the Woodbridge Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 10:00 A.M.

*Brenda Velasco:* I have the good fortune of being with Jim Patten, former teacher and former Councilman. He's also the nephew of Ed Patten, one of our outstanding Congressman for this district.

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

*James Patten:* I am James Edward Patten. The Edward is because of my uncle Ed and I was born James Edward Patten. I was reared in Woodbridge behind the Town Hall, 8 Wallace Street, and I was born on July 4, 1933.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*James Patten:* I know.

*Brenda Velasco:* Independence, okay. Maybe that's why you went into teaching.

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

*James Patten:* I have lived in Woodbridge all my life since '33 except naturally you know being away when I was in the service.

*Brenda Velasco:* When were you in the service?

*James Patten:* The Korean War, 1951 to 1955, four years.

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

*James Patten:* My family has been here quite a while. My mother's people lived on upper Main Street and they worked the clay pits before the Woodbridge Center was there. They owned a part of it. They didn't own the whole thing but they owned a part of it and that's how they made their living and everybody worked there. They dug out the clay, put it in wagons, had the horses pull it and then they took it all the way down to the **Valentine's Brickyard** which is right now the other side of the Turnpike and they brought the raw clay in. Later they lost that property with the Depression.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you go back a couple of generations then?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* The clay pits were one of the big attractions for job employment.

*James Patten:* I leaned it is the only clay of its kind in the world. There is a stream, they call it a stream but it's really a vein, that runs down to Sayreville and there's a pit down in Sayreville. That is basically the same but the Woodbridge clay was the best in the world. Why? Because it could sustain the greatest amount of heat that other clays couldn't. So they made the bricks in **Valentine**..... When they built the railroads and the steel and the rails in the United States, they used the Woodbridge

clay bricks because they could get a higher temperature and a higher temperature meant a better grade of steel. There were trains and engines running on them and so forth.

*Brenda Velasco:* A good fact and that vein runs from Carteret to Sayreville, as you said, and we have the only still standing kiln in east Jersey off Pennval Road. So I'm glad you mentioned about the quality of it. So this is Woodbridge Proper you lived in?

*James Patten:* I grew up in Woodbridge Proper. I never fully understood what Woodbridge Proper meant. It's always like the other parts of Woodbridge were not proper or something but I think there's a definition of it that it really means the center as it were or the origin: the hub. Because when I grew up, out in Iselin, there were all farms and my older brother had friends out there. Their name was Shepard and I went with him for visits there and so forth. All of Iselin was all farmland. So was all along Woodbridge Center Drive where all those condos are. Up on the top there was a dairy farm and when I got out of the service in '55 I got into the fire department as a volunteer and I had some family people as volunteers so I joined that. Then as a drill, a drill is a practice that the volunteers do, we used to go up to the dairy. All the men who lived in there in a barracks type of thing just lived on these basic wooden beds with conservative mattresses. They were not the kind with springs or anything, they were just like mats, and they all slept in that. They were rough and tumble guys.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, we're talking about Maple Tree. (Maple Dairy Farm)

*James Patten:* Maple Tree, yes. I remember I went in there and I didn't know there were that many working up there. There were a lot of men working the dairy farm. I mean the whole building upstairs was full. I would say there were, I didn't count them, but I would say somewhere around seventy-five men up there.

*Brenda Velasco:* What fire department were you?

*James Patten:* Woodbridge #1.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where were you living at that time?

*James Patten:* At that time I was an adult and I was living for a while on Bunns Lane. When I came out of the service in '55 I had no job or any place to go. I thought my father knew people in government and so forth and that I would have some job I could do, whether it be a mailman or something. But there wasn't so I had plans to go to school anyway. Because I was a veteran and we didn't have any money when we were starting out I was able to get an apartment and we had one child so we were living on Bunns Lane. We lived at 6B Bunns Lane for quite awhile while I was going to school.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then you're a great success story too.

*James Patten:* Yes, and it makes me feel good to say that.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where did your dad live when you were growing up?

*James Patten:* My dad lived on Wallace Street which is a little curvy street right behind the Townhall. We always called it Townhall, some call it City Hall but it's always been the Townhall.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that's where you grew up basically.

*James Patten:* 8 Wallace Street, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, let's get back. You're younger now and you're growing up in your dad's house. Were there a lot of houses on that street behind Townhall?

*James Patten:* Yes, Decker built those houses in the '20s and right after World War I the '20s were a very upbeat time. Everybody felt that was the war to end all wars and we were all going to get jobs and we would have no more of that so people were optimistic. My father got that house because he was a mailman in Perth Amboy all his life and he played the baseball pool. I don't know if it was legal or not, but the baseball pool was you would pick three numbers or something and if you won you got a hefty prize. Well anyway, he won the baseball pool and with that he took that money and that became the down payment on our house on Wallace Street. The house on Wallace Street sold for \$2,500.00 in the '20s; I saw the deed.

*Brenda Velasco:* You still have the deed?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's priceless. You know you could go back to the current owner and show him.

*James Patten:* I know who lives there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you happen to remember what your dad's property tax was back then?

*James Patten:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* No, you were too young. So this was more or less a development back there, so it was paved streets?

*James Patten:* No, our definition of a development is to be much broader. Decker built, I would say, like six houses on Wallace Street, and across the street were little bungalows that popped up after World War II.

**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:* How about services, did the township have the sewers, running water and garbage?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, because you lived in Woodbridge Proper.

*James Patten:* Yes. Everybody in Woodbridge Township, the peripheries of Woodbridge Township, didn't have those things. Again I bring up Iselin but that was all farmland out in Iselin and they didn't have all that water supply and city services as it were.

*Brenda Velasco:* Neither did Colonia. How about the stores?

*James Patten:* The stores were all local people and I knew all of them. I knew them because my relatives had a big trucking company in Woodbridge, **VanTassel's Trucking**. And they also had **VanTassel's College Inn** which was a very big business as far as working men. Mostly men would come in there and the bar would be three deep. So the whole family lived off the bar and the trucking company.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was the **College Inn** located?

*James Patten:* On Main Street, there's the Italian restaurant there now. It was across from the old **A&P** but that's gone. I would say it was six stores down from Amboy Avenue.

*Brenda Velasco:* **Ristorante Venezia** or something?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Any other stores that you remember?

*James Patten:* There was **Choper's**. **Choper's** was down on the corner of Main and North William and there was a tavern there, too. There were a lot of Jewish people there. I grew up in an atmosphere of Jewish people, and the Kaufman's, I can name all of them, lived there. There were hardware stores on Main Street, well two on Main Street, and somebody would send me to the hardware store and they would say go to the Jews. Well that was not a pejorative, like I never thought of that as anything name calling, go to the Jews, because around the corner on School Street was **Pat's Barbershop** and then Mrs. Tier had her hardware store there. She was a great lady.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you had a lot of local stores here that served the basic needs?

*James Patten:* And because I had cousins and aunts that were in business on Main Street through them, one way or another, I got to know all of the owners personally and they knew who I was and that I was related to the Van Tassels. It was very inbred like that.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a close knit community.

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about houses of worship?

*James Patten:* The synagogue came later. I think the synagogue was out of Woodbridge Proper but there were a lot of Jewish people there because I would meet them in my aunt's house. The Kaufmans owned the pajama factory down by the railroad on Grove Street right down by Woodbridge Junior High. That was on the corner of Grove and it went right into the railroad wall. You would turn right and down there was the pajama factory. Ironically the house that I bought when I got out of the service was on Grove Street and that house was built and owned by the Kaufmans who owned the pajama factory.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you're living in their house then.

*James Patten:* I'm living in their house and then later, it never occurred to me because I was still a boy, I became friends with Hugh Quigley and Jerry Kaufman whose father owned the pajama factory. That's how I learned all about the Jewish thing because in Jerry's house you had to put on the yarmulka or you had the pictures and the candles and all. We had a lot of fun doing that and next door was High Quigley and Hugh Quigley's father was the mayor. (1952-1959)

*Brenda Velasco:* Right.

*James Patten:* And they all lived on Tisdale Place so Tisdale had these people. Mr. Quigley was the superintendent of **Shell Oil** and I remember he was working and never went to college. He was a very sophisticated guy and a very smart man. Mrs. Quigley was the classiest lady other than my mother and my wife; she was the classiest lady that I ever met anywhere. It wasn't ringing a bell with me that she was the mayor's wife but she would also make Hugh, we called him Shookie but I don't know why, but Shookie and I would always get soup, she always made soup and crackers. It was usually tomato and until this day when I think of tomato soup I think of Mrs. Quigley. She was a classy lady. She always liked to dress wearing stockings and shoes and a dress, you know, like around the house. Her hair was always in place.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a different era too, a different era of time for fashion. It's interesting. Okay, any other houses of worship?

*James Patten:* We always had the White Church, what we called it, and the Methodist Church down on Rahway Avenue: Green and Rahway Avenue down that way. I have relatives buried in the back there. One of the churches there is.....

*Brenda Velasco:* The White Church is Presbyterian.

*James Patten:* And the one next door is the Church of England.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, Anglican, right: Episcopalian.

*James Patten:* I tried to find them back there. There are some incredibly old tombstones and I took some of my students there one time and I was trying to find my mother's mother. Bray was her name but she was Protestant and she married a Catholic by the name of Walsh so my mother's father was Jim Walsh, that's another reason my name is Jim, and then this Bray. I never met either one of them.

*Brenda Velasco:* After the interview let me give you a name to contact about the tombstones. They have a whole directory.

*James Patten:* Okay.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about St. James?

*James Patten:* St. James used to be upper Main Street, a wooden structure, and they brought it down on rollers and horses. My mother told me about that. I have since then seen a picture of it. They brought that down and that church was placed across Grove Street. Where the playground for St. James is now that was where the church was, a big wooden church. I loved it. It was very homey.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wood is warmer.

*James Patten:* I've always been attracted to wood not because of Woodbridge but.....

*Brenda Velasco:* No, it's a warmer feel.

*James Patten:* And Monsignor McCorristin was always the pastor from the beginning of time and Roosevelt was always the president from the beginning of time when I grew up. They were my leaders: in religion was Monsignor McCorristin and Franklin Roosevelt. I remember I went in and told my father the day I heard, I was older then, it was close to the end of the war around '45 or something when Roosevelt died and I heard it through my friends. I came in the kitchen and told my father; they said President Roosevelt died. And he said Jimmy, don't be joking about that, that's not funny, and he kind of put me off. He was talking to my mother about something. And I said no dad, dad, I'm not kidding you, he died. And he said, well I would have heard that. He put me off but then later it was announced that Roosevelt did die that day. I was disappointed.

*Brenda Velasco:* A lot of people were.

*James Patten:* No, I had important news but when you're a kid you don't count and I came in and I had this big news.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you knew it before he did.

*James Patten:* And nobody would give me credit.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about schools? Which schools did you attend growing up?

*James Patten:* St. James School.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was it K through 8?

*James Patten:* Yes, all the Dunns and Ed McKinney the janitor. We played tricks on him. That poor man, we played a lot of tricks on him. We hid things on the top of the door that went down to the cellar and we had fake wires there that looked like

they were hooked up to electric and tied it around the handle. Oh God, all that stuff that said don't touch danger, and all that.

*Brenda Velasco:* He survived you.

*James Patten:* He survived us, yes. He was the janitor in St. James a long time.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about high school, where did you go to high school?

*James Patten:* Well from eighth grade I then went to the seminary, Mater Dolorosa Seminary, outside of Chicago, Old Park, I think that's outside of Chicago.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so when you were in high school that's where you went.

*James Patten:* Then I came out of there and I met a girl named Rita and I fell in love with her during the summer, my first love. That really scared me being in love. I was never in love before. Like I totally worshipped Rita and she worshipped me. I mean that was the impression. It was like the greatest thing that ever happened.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was first love.

*James Patten:* Yes, you see I still remember her.

*Brenda Velasco:* You always remember the first one.

*James Patten:* She was really perfect. After I left the seminary, then I came to St.

Mary's. I was going to go to St. Benedict's but I don't know why. I wanted St. Benedict's and then I wound up at St. Mary's. I didn't wind up; I went to St. Mary's.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you went to St. Benedict's that was in Newark?

*James Patten:* I started to enroll there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then you switched.

*James Patten:* I'm not sure of the reason why. Then plans changed and I went to St. Mary's.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that was it?

*James Patten:* There was no fight or anything, there was no dispute. I don't know I just wound up at St. Mary's.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a lot closer.

*James Patten:* It might have been money, too.

*Brenda Velasco:* But that's the one in South Amboy you're talking about?

*James Patten:* Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, and it is much closer.

*James Patten:* Oh yes, I just took the bus down there. It's only four miles away. I loved St. Mary's. I was in the play when I was in the band. I played the trombone for a while, I didn't like that, and then I became a drummer. To this day I'm a drummer because I was in the band in St. Mary's and marched in parades on Holy Name Sunday. I loved it. I loved being in the play, it was great.

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

*James Patten:* Well we had the old post office when I was a kid. The main library, in which we're sitting, was not here then.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where did you visit the library?

*James Patten:* I'm trying to think. We went to the library in St. James and St. Mary's. I didn't use the Woodbridge post office too much. The post office, I think, was built later than when I was a kid. Like I was a kid in the Depression, in the '30s, and then during World War II, then I think the Woodbridge post office was built after

that. I think I saw a picture once. It was a small wooden home spun little building on Main Street I think.

*Brenda Velasco:* It moved a couple of places. How about the parks? Were there parks in Woodbridge?

*James Patten:* Yes, just about the same parks that are there now.

*Brenda Velasco:* Along Heard's Creek?

*James Patten:* Yes, and I remember one of the most terrifying things for me as a youngster in St. James, maybe I was eleven or so, was when polio came out where kids were getting polio. A boy named James Duffle down the street caught it and was paralyzed and he died. That terrified me that it was that close on my street and I just had these images of these germs being like on telephone poles and all over the place. Somebody said don't go over to the park. I would go up Main Street because I thought I was safer from polio but I didn't go over to the parks because somebody said stay away from the parks because you'll get polio. I was really terrified about polio. Kids I knew were getting paralyzed.

*Brenda Velasco:* And we tend to forget about that because it's basically been eradicated with the vaccine.

*James Patten:* Right, Salk was it?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, Salk and Sabin. How about the firehouse, because you volunteered there eventually?

*James Patten:* The firehouse was very important to me. It was that same Van Tassel family that had the trucking outfit on Main Street and the bar. It was bigger than a bar though. It was really something. I mean everybody in town was there. The committee people from Woodbridge Township would go in there and meet, I saw pictures. They would meet after hours and they had their political meetings in the **College Inn**. All kinds of decisions were made there. They were committeemen then, they weren't Councilmen. Each committeeman was in charge of a different service. For instance you might be a committeeman for the public safety. You would be personally in charge of the police. You are in charge of the police like a captain on a ship unlike the way it is now; it's more of a sophisticated group activity.

*Brenda Velasco:* We reorganized with the Ward and the At-Large and we don't have a specific responsibility. We have more of a strong mayor now than what you had growing up. I think it changed in the late '60s.

*James Patten:* I know Joe Sommers was a committeeman, which is like a Councilman, and he was in charge of streets and things like that. So anything to do with streets or plumbing or sewers or things, go see Joe Sommers is what I'd hear my mother say. You know they were talking in the **A&P** and I would hear these conversations. It was reduced to one person who ran that department personally.

*Brenda Velasco:* And by the time you became a Councilman, because you were a Councilman, it had changed already I think.

*James Patten:* Yes, was it Zirpolo?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, I think that's when it changed. (1960s)

*James Patten:* I was in that fire department after I got out of the service in '55. The same Van Tassels, they were related to my mother so they encouraged me to go down to be a volunteer fireman and I did. Like everybody in Woodbridge was in the fire department. There was a waiting list that was hard to get on and so I finally got on. I

remember they voted for you to come in and they had a box with a hole in it. Every person would go up to vote on let's say Joe Jones hypothetically, and they would put a white ball or a black ball in that hole in the box. You couldn't tell or not, and when they opened the box after the vote if there was one black ball in there you couldn't be a fireman.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*James Patten:* You were black balled. That's where that phrase came from.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was very tight then to get in there.

*James Patten:* There was a long waiting list. You had to know somebody, not necessarily Republican or Democrat. You know the Main Tavern, the Almasi's down on Main Street, they were basically Republican. Then Charlie Molnar's bar was over there. Charlie was a great guy. He was one of the best guys I ever met. He became a Councilman for the 1<sup>st</sup> Ward and he had a bar on William Street and New Street. He was a fantastic guy and he was Hungarian so there was a huge Hungarian population in Woodbridge Proper. Charlie actually had a peek-a-boo in his door. My wife and I would stop after a movie and go have a beer because I always felt she was safe there. Charlie had this little door where after, let's say eleven o'clock or so, somebody would have to knock to go in. You just couldn't go in. It could have been all unconstitutional but he would open this little door and look; and if he didn't know you, he just closed it and he didn't say anything and you couldn't go in. He had to open the door to let you in. So we were all in there and I felt by bringing my wife there she was perfectly safe.

*Brenda Velasco:* He controlled who was coming in especially at.....

*James Patten:* No strangers or unknown characters could come in Charlie Molnar's tavern because the door was locked from nine o'clock on and he would open that little door. If he didn't know you, you were not coming in.

*Brenda Velasco:* It wouldn't exist unless it was a private club today. Okay, and the schools, we mentioned St. James and we know you attended St. Mary's.....

*James Patten:* The Barron Avenue School was there, that was the high school. There were two split sessions. Then we had Lynn School up on Strawberry Hill and No. 1 School and Fred Buonocore was the principal of two schools. He was principal of No. 1 School which is downtown and up on Strawberry Hill there was a little school up there he was also the principal there so he would go back and forth. No. 1 School.....

*Brenda Velasco:* That's the Administration building now.

*James Patten:* No. 1 School.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes.

*James Patten:* But up on Strawberry Hill there was a little grammar school with like about three grades or something and Dr. Fred Buonocore would just go up there. My kids went up there to school, my wife took them up there, and the fascinating thing about that school on Strawberry Hill was if you wanted to give Buonocore credit you couldn't. I mean it was self-contained. There was only like three grades up there, first, second and third I think. And these women, I didn't know any men up there, but these mature women ran that school more or less by themselves. Although he had an office, he came in and he went down. I guess they would call him up if there was a problem. But on a day to day basis these teachers, these senior teachers, they were up



on the hill, as we called it, and they ran the school. That's not to say Buonocore didn't call up on the phone and go up there in the car.

*Brenda Velasco:* His presence wasn't always there, his physical presence.

*James Patten:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right, because he had the other school.

*James Patten:* But those women, those teachers, ran that school.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that's where your children went?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* So it was a good experience. It's no longer.....

*James Patten:* But we loved it. We knew it was organized and under control up on that hill. If you wanted your kids to go into the first three grades where they could go helter skelter, good, bad, like wild crazy, nobody was going wild up on Strawberry Hill.

*Brenda Velasco:* So that was a good experience, good educational experience.

*James Patten:* My wife brags about it. It was very good.

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

*James Patten:* When I was really small, I played whatever was in the movies like there were World War II movies. So adjacent to my parent's home on Wallace Street, there was an abandoned house. We called it the haunted house, and then there was a large ground to it. It was quite a big lot. We played in that house and we built a house in the tree in the back and we had a rope that we climbed. We hid in there and pulled the rope hoping nobody could get us.

*Brenda Velasco:* What a great experience!

*James Patten:* Yes, it was great and we made that ourselves, too. We sat there and we did a lot of reading comic books. There was a lot of comic book swapping going on. We all had our favorites. I kind of liked Superman and I liked The Torch. The Torch was a character who could set himself on fire and catch criminals with that fire. You know burn his way in. I thought he was great. I could remember sitting on the corner where the police station is now by Mrs. Fodor's store and we would sit there if we were not up in our clubhouse. We read comic books a lot and I have to mention that because you would say well what did you do? In the earlier years, before sports, we read comic books, we played games and we told stories.

*Brenda Velasco:* But it was creative.

*James Patten:* Yes, we didn't do anything bad. One time we had a big decision, we had to let Audrey Dunn and Nancy Olsen come up to our playhouse.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you were integrating it with the girls.

*James Patten:* That was a big decision. That didn't happen overnight. Then we decided we were going to have radio plays because we didn't have a big stage where you could have a play that way so we knew we needed the girls because Nancy, she became a teacher later, was very good at writing out the scripts like what we were going to say and all. We had a make believe microphone all up in this tree house and then the girls came in because we needed characters in our stories: the mother, sister and the neighbor lady. So that was one of the reasons that the girls came in. We weren't anti-girls it was just that.....

*Brenda Velasco:* You were typical boys.

*James Patten:* We were just boys and why would you want to play with girls in the first place anyway? And then the other things I did we would do is we would go to the movies like Wake Island, I remember I was a kid, and go get penny candy at **Fodor's**. Mrs. Fodor was on the corner before you turned to go down to Sewaren and the steps are still out there, these concrete steps. She had a bid candy display case and my father would give me twenty cents to go to the movies. We had the **State Theatre** it was over where **Quick Chek** is now.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was easy to walk to for you.

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Very close. How much did the movies cost?

*James Patten:* Seventeen cents so I had three cents left over. I found out later through my uncles that my father was quite a comedian but I didn't know it. He would make a big deal out of looking in his purse for the dime and then like give me another nickel and then go trying to find the rest and I'm standing there losing my patience, you know. Anyway he would always give me twenty cents to go to **Fodor's** and a lot of it was three for a penny candy like these orange slices and the malt balls. Malt balls, I think, were like four for a penny. They weren't as popular. But those things that you could chew would last longer and we wanted to buy that. The chocolate melted quicker.

*Brenda Velasco:* And don't forget you saw two movies at one time with coming attractions going back to that era.

*James Patten:* Right.

*Brenda Velasco:* Maybe a cartoon or a newsreel.

*James Patten:* When I was a little boy they had that theatre there, Mr. Szabo owned the theatre. Speck Coughlin was the man who took the tickets. I remember him because he had a uniform and he had long underwear on. In the summer there was no air conditioning and he would roll up his sleeves to his uniform but the white long underwear was still down to the wrist. And you'd say God why doesn't he take that off? But he never did. I had a brother who was deaf, he became deaf at the age of seven through a nerve something, I don't know what to call it; it wasn't a disease but an affliction. They were all twelve or thirteen years older than me. My mother had three boys and then thirteen years later I was born so I really grew up as an only boy. Where my brothers all went into World War II, I didn't. But Bob was deaf, he went to the New Jersey School for the Deaf, and they told me that at the **State Theatre** Bob used to go by himself on Tuesdays. There were a lot of Hungarians in the First Ward, and he would go to the Hungarian movie on Tuesday afternoons. The movies were in Hungarian and he would watch things about the Cossacks racing with horses and all this kind of stuff. He loved it seating there bearing in mind that he was deaf. He didn't mind that they were speaking in Hungarian, he got the drift of it anyway.

*Brenda Velasco:* And he saw the pictures. You can understand that.

*James Patten:* He snuck in the back door. Speck Coughlin never thought that he would be in there because he wasn't Hungarian. I always thought that was funny though. Here's a little deaf kid who doesn't speak Hungarian sitting there watching the guys on horses raising their swords.

*Brenda Velasco:* A lot of action especially with the Cossacks they were always killing.

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

*James Patten:* Church I would say. I was an altar boy. Everything was around the church. Then we had the CYO which was a little bigger than it is now. We had a baseball team and football team. I was never too big around sports myself. I thought it was kind of silly. I mean they made such a fuss over playing the game. I like playing games but to get on a team and you have to do all the practice and all; I thought it was a waste of time. But I did play.

*Brenda Velasco:* This was with the CYO?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* They had the teams; that was quite active.

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

*James Patten:* I knew everybody. I don't know if I should say this now if it's on the record but I never met a blind person or an African American person until I was eighteen years old and in the Navy in basic training. I was in the Navy for two years and there were no blacks. In 1951, they were segregated, and then later I was transferred to be a medic. I went to medical school and then I was a combat medic with the Marine Corps for two years. I had to go to training in uniform and that's when I met my first African American or black guy who trained us about combat. I didn't like it because it made me very uncomfortable having this black guy here. He had like a Boy Scout hat on that the Marines wore. He was trained as a combat medic and I was very uncomfortable not because I didn't like him but he was so strange and so different. I didn't know anything. I never played with a black kid. There were none in St. James and none anywhere on my street. He's the first one I met and then what calmed me down was they sensed that we were a little anxious about this guy training and they told us he had the Navy Cross.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*James Patten:* Which is the second highest award you could get. So when I heard he had the Navy Cross then all my fears.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Dissipated.

*James Patten:* Don't get me wrong, it wasn't hatred or anything it was fear. It was strange and I didn't get it. But when they told me he had a Navy Cross I just totally realized.....

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a different experience for you.

*James Patten:* He helped me later to get a medal in my pistol shooting so I had a very positive thing with him. Training with the Marines for combat is very intense. It isn't like eight to four or something. It's going on all the time. So like after supper when you had nice weather, we were down at Camp Lejeune, Carolina, then you could go over, if you wanted to be a good Marine, and volunteer. If you weren't scoring too well on the pistol range, and I wasn't, you could go down and sign up to practice. There was my sergeant, he was really a medic, he was like a first class petty officer which is like a tech sergeant. And he was wearing a Marine outfit too and of course he had the Navy Cross. I was in awe of him. I was surprised one time when I went down after supper or after chow as they would call it, and there he was at the firing line and he said I'm glad to see you're here-I remember the conversation-

because you aren't doing too well. So I didn't want to fail because if you failed the 45 pistol range you would have to leave. You wouldn't be out of the service but I'd have to leave the Marine Corps and go back to some other duty with the Navy which I did not want. My brother had been in the Navy and all. I didn't want to disgrace my family like I dropped out. He taught me a couple of tricks on how to fire a 45 and then I went from that to where I got an expert medal.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*James Patten:* There are three levels in shooting. The highest is the expert, the sharp shooter and then there's the basic one. So I went to where I wasn't qualified. I also prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary while I was down there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Prayers always help.

*James Patten:* I mean that's how much I wanted to pass. I did not want to drop out of that. But he gave me some important tricks and one was to close my right eye and fire with my left eye. When I did that I had to look down my arm in a different way. And bingo they all went in and I got an expert medal.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, he taught you well.

*James Patten:* So that was my encounter with the first black man that I ever knew. He helped me out.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was a positive. So you liked your section of Woodbridge and you stayed in Woodbridge.

*James Patten:* I loved it. I'm still here.

*Brenda Velasco:* I know.

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

*James Patten:* Absolutely. Well the one construction thing was when I was younger. It was the building of the New Jersey Turnpike because you go down Berry Street all the way down and then there was **A.B. Neese** where there were huge piles of sand and various kinds of stones. He was in construction to making road pavement or whatever, you know, concrete and all. Then Berry Street went like from the City Hall all the way down to the water and barge s came in there. We would jump in there and swim off the barge.

*Brenda Velasco:* What a playground you had!

*James Patten:* There was also some fecal matter in the water, not a lot, but we saw it. I think about how funny it was. We laughed at it and when you're swimming you just push it out of sight. I think it had to do when the tide was going out or something. We had no sewer system. When I was on the Council with Joe DeMarino we had to upgrade the sewer system that we had here because it was all broken down. They're able to put television cameras inside.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes.

*James Patten:* It's amazing!

*Brenda Velasco:* We have these little micro-cameras that go into the sewers and as a result we know where the repairs are needed and which are going to collapse sooner, you know, the condition. The technology has greatly facilitated.

*James Patten:* Going out into Colonia on Lake Avenue and Inman, the whole length of it was all broken when they went in and checked it so we had a dispute on the

Council about that because they wanted to do that job. Well, I mean that would eat up all of the funds to do that. You know yourself, personally, what a long road that is and to come and change all that would take a tremendous amount of money. Politically Bernie Peterson and I, he was the First Ward Councilman and I was At-Large, together we realized all the money is funneled out there so you get this insider dispute where we have to keep money for Woodbridge to fix the streets in Woodbridge. A, it's the right thing to do and B, politically people expect you to fight for where you live.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that's what happened when you created the Ward Council people. This is what is expected and it still goes on because that's capital bonding and that's where we get our funds now for something like that. When were you on the Council?

*James Patten:* '87 to the end of '90: four years. Joe DeMarino was the mayor. Arlene Friscia, Bernie Peterson and Pete Dalina were on there for a while. Joe DeMarino was the most controversial man I ever met in my life. I didn't know him; I won't get into it. It's true. Eddie Crowe and the local politicians in the First Ward, Eddie was the chairman, got together that I was going to run for First Ward. And then one thing led to another and then I wound up being At-Large because the mayor needed a ticket.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay and you ran on the Democratic ticket right?

*James Patten:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you had to represent the whole town.

*James Patten:* Joe DeMarino made a big impression on me because he was so controversial.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, anything else for Question #9?

*James Patten:* By then I became a fire commissioner when they built the Woodbridge Center. The fire commissioners, there were five fire commissioners in Woodbridge, I had hydrants and safety. I was the junior guy to get hydrants and safety but it turned out to be a big deal because the hydrants turned out to be a big deal because they built Woodbridge Center. Woodbridge Center had all these new fire lines and pipes and things and they were breaking every rule in the book. I couldn't get an inspector to go there so I used to go out on my own in the fire car and sit out there and go in on my own. Nobody told me, the mayor didn't tell me, God didn't tell me, I mean nobody told me. I went out and I just saw all those violations that were there. They had boxes and all kinds of lockers piled in front of the doors. It was outrageous. I even had a threat come to me when I was fire commissioner. I'm not going to say how it came, but it told me I better cut it out or else.

*Brenda Velasco:* Now this is when you were the fire commissioner, what years, do you remember?

*James Patten:* In the '70s.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you saw Woodbridge Center being built then.

*James Patten:* I was part of it in the sense I had to go to meetings because all of a sudden it became very important. My committee of eight to go out there and we were the law. So I sat with the engineer and with the head of Woodbridge Center.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was the Rouse Company, I think, that built it.

*James Patten:* I didn't know these people but I found that I kind of cooled off a little bit after I got into some of these emergency meetings and violations. I realized that the top people in the company, building and owning it, that it was not their intention to do all these things. It was such a herculean job that chips just fall to the side and more important things steal time. So I felt a little better that it wasn't like a dishonest company coming in because as soon as you pointed out things, they would start changing this and changing that. It was unbelievable how they were just breaking all the rules but I think it was the employees and construction people who were setting up these sprinkler systems. If there were a fire in Woodbridge Center, the thing the fire company does is they replenish the water. There's a pipe outside that replenishes the water that is in the system that first comes down from the ceilings to stop it right away. Then they use up that water quickly and the fire truck comes with a seven hundred gallon pumper and they start feeding into these pipes to replenish the sprinkler system. I saw a lot of movies where a lot of people were killed in these centers. It's the way they leave. They can panic and they get scared and they step on each other and actually kill each other.

*Brenda Velasco:* Panic and hysteria; more than the actual fire.

*James Patten:* Like you hear about these dances on the third floor in New York and they kill each other on the stairs.

*Brenda Velasco:* You saw a lot as a fire commissioner then. That had an impact on you.

*James Patten:* Yes. Well, I had a passion because I knew my uncle was a Congressman (Ed Patten) and I knew the Van Tassels like, you know, with the fire department. I was always very cognate getting the medal with the Marines and all. I didn't want to let my family down; I didn't want to embarrass my family that was very important. I didn't want anybody getting killed over in that center.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's a big responsibility.

*James Patten:* Yes, a big scandal. So, yes, the Turnpike coming through I remember that.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you see houses being moved when the Turnpike came through?

*James Patten:* I don't remember that. Fulton Street was cut in half. There were always two Fulton Streets, I mean before the Turnpike, but down in the other end the Hungarian people that I know like the Nagy's and others lived at the end of Fulton. They were all Hungarians and that led up the hill to where that little school was.

*Brenda Velasco:* Strawberry Hill?

*James Patten:* A lot of Hungarian kids went to that school. But the Hungarian kids from down there were not allowed to come down Fulton Street to the middle of town. They had to go some other way.

*Brenda Velasco:* What, their parents or the other neighbors?

*James Patten:* Oh no, not the parents. The kids would let the Hungarian kids come down Fulton Street only to a point and then they couldn't come down to Main Street. My wife told me stories about South Amboy, you know, where Polish kids could only go on certain streets in South Amboy because it was the Irish and the Polish and they blocked them and all. So there was segregation in these neighborhoods and things were always going on. It wasn't too much about blacks; it was all about.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Different ethnic groups.

*James Patten:* Yes, your Polish went to the Polish church and your Irish went to St. James, you know.

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

*James Patten:* I like its access to so many places that I want to go. We all know that it's crowded at certain times during the day. I remember Joe DeMarino said one time that there are, somebody told him, more cars that pass through Woodbridge than the Lincoln and the Holland Tunnel put together.

*Brenda Velasco:* We certainly feel that. I don't know if that's actually true but we sure do feel that.

*James Patten:* He said that, I was just saying where I got it from, I got it from the mayor and he said one of the engineers told him. Well when you think all these cars go 60 to 70 mph on the Turnpike, Parkway, Route #35, Route #9.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Route #1.

*James Patten:* Right, all this going on.

*Brenda Velasco:* Rote #27, we got quite a collection here.

*James Patten:* It's all here, yes.

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

*James Patten:* Yes, my son Tom. Tom wound up being in the school system as a carpenter and now he's the superintendent of buildings and grounds, which he did on his own. I had nothing to do with that. In fact I never bothered him about it. He would not like me bothering him about it.

*Brenda Velasco:* He's the only one that lives in the township?

*James Patten:* No, I have William. He works for the township in the Sanitation Department. He lives over on Caroline Street which is this side of the Turnpike. They started talking about this side of the Turnpike and the other side of the Turnpike. It really split the town in two actually.

*Brenda Velasco:* This wasn't the only community it split, it also split Elizabeth badly.

*James Patten:* What it really hurt was, because I know teachers who came to Woodbridge because of a strike up there but who said how the Turnpike split Elizabeth. Neighbors, relatives, friends and schools, everything, split them right in two. They said like cutting your finger it will heal up right away; no it doesn't. It never healed here. We don't talk about it anymore.

*Brenda Velasco:* But you grew up when it was built and so you still have memories of it.

*James Patten:* We used to play baseball and all down there. Then it was a stadium. I saw that built. We played football and my brother, who was deaf, played. It was semi-pro. You had to pay to go in. There was a big stadium down at the end of Berry Street. There's an American Legion there. Part of that building that they used for the American Legion was the front entrance and it went on and on. That was before the Turnpike. Cars were parked all along all the way around my street. On a Sunday, they played the semi-pro football and it's hard to imagine the number of people that filled all the side streets and filled all the grounds around the stadium, where the Turnpike later came, to see these games. Everybody was into it. Everybody was there. It was really tremendous. (Golden Bears)

*Brenda Velasco:* Woodbridge has always been a football town.

**12. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?**

*Brenda Velasco:* What schools did you teach in?

*James Patten:* One year I was a professional teacher, I mean a steady teacher. It's kind of all the same after a while. You say, oh you're in Colonia or oh you're in JFK. When you get in the classroom kids are kids, history books are history books, chalkboards are chalkboards and the same disciplinary problems. I loved teaching though. I really loved every minute of it. Later they gave me an assignment because they got this idea that we're going to split up and then we were going to have these experimental programs. One was learning about film. These were semester courses that were at Colonia High and I got creative writing. I had a degree in English and literature and writing so forth and I loved to write. But I really learned about teaching creative writing in the classroom teaching creative writing. I never had such a good time in all my life. Then what came was creative writing at Colonia High but we had a Chinese class and Mr. Wu. We had a Chinese garden, ding ho and all this kind of stuff. I got in trouble with the creative writing because they were talking about symbolism and so forth. I hung this red sheet. The kids got it dyed red and we put on it-Mr. Wu taught me the symbol for peace, which is like a square with little legs underneath it-and we hung that outside. The janitor called the principal because they saw red and said it was communism. They said Patten is in there and there's going to be communism with the teachers.

*Brenda Velasco:* You of all people.

*James Patten:* I said, are you people out of your mind or what? You ask the kids what that is. It's a symbol for peace. They said why was it red? I said I don't know they just did it. It wasn't communism or anything. It was a funny story, I think.

*Brenda Velasco:* But you had a good experience as a teacher.

*James Patten:* I loved that and I loved the Chinese garden. Then their guests were Chinese that came and I used to invite them in my English class. We were talking expressions in Chinese and anemology of wars and where they came from which is fascinating to me. Because I'll tell you in my education, good old St. James and St. Mary's and all, there was almost zero about Asia and zero about India.

*Brenda Velasco:* They were starving.

*James Patten:* That's what missionaries were or something, I don't know. We used to take up collections and send them money in a box these little candy boxes of money. A funny story that probably doesn't fit in here but early when my parents were on upper Main Street, it was a pretty big family, there were fifteen sons and daughters, so that's how they can do all this work. They ran this collecting clay business. It was a big deal because you need a wagon and you need horses. You've got to take care of the horses and you have to have stables and on their day off, this is before I was born, maybe in the '20s I guess, World War I that period. Before World War I because there were cars in World War I, they started with cars, but all of that clay was coming out. My mother, my brother, my uncle Tommy, my uncle Jim, my uncle Walter, they all worked with that back breaking, it was really hard work, with this pick and shovel to dig the clay. You know you can flush it; you can't burn it and



you can't melt it. You just got to dig in there where these chunks were. So they would lift it and put it in these wagons. I still have pictures of it.

*Brenda Velasco:* You still have pictures?

*James Patten:* I don't know; I have to look.

*Brenda Velasco:* Please look.

*James Patten:* And there would be like two horses holding them up. Actually the more they dug down, there would be clay and they were starting to make this cavity so that also made an exit road that was more and more uphill. That angle was tough on the horses so that limited how much you could put in the wagon. You know that that was a big problem. Then they would have to pull it by the horse, this wagon, all the way down to **Valentine's**.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was **Valentine's** located?

*James Patten:* It's still there I think on the other side of the Turnpike. It's down at the end of Fulton Street. You look to the left and there's a big factory kind of thing.

*Brenda Velasco:* I think that's Pennval Road.

*James Patten:* Thousands of bricks used to be piled there and they had straw in between and they had something else so they wouldn't break.

*Brenda Velasco:* This was an interesting story.

*James Patten:* The story about all this with my mother and her family, my mother wasn't big in clay. She was a beautiful girl: a tall, beautiful girl. I saw pictures of her.

*Brenda Velasco:* Now she was part of the Van Tassel family.

*James Patten:* Well my mother's sister, Kate Walsh, married Harry Van Tassel. My mother told me an early story, which maybe doesn't apply here but I think it's cute. Talking about living in Woodbridge before all these highways we were talking about and all these cars and trucks and everything. My mother said when she was a young girl, she was born in 1895 or something, like maybe sixteen, she and her sister Julia, a daring thing, now Main Street was all dirt and Metuchen Avenue really went to Metuchen because there was no Woodbridge Center there. She and her sister Julia, one Sunday morning, now they had these other horses that were work horses, big tough horses, not Hollywood horses.....

*Brenda Velasco:* They're not pretty and elegant.

*James Patten:* They were tough workers but they were resting on a Sunday. But they had one horse that was like a good car. It was black and shiny and they had this wagon that you could go in that was painted and had yellow wheel spokes with all the trim and nice leather. So they had some money, you know up there they had a big family and all that and this expensive horse and wagon. It wasn't a big wagon but it had a seat for two and these big fancy wheels with the yellow painted spokes with red stripes. So my grandfather, whom I never met, was sleeping, the whole family was sleeping, so she and her sister took the fancy horse and they left and went down Main Street which was dirt all the way down to what is Route #9 and Route #35 (Amboy Avenue) all the way into Rahway, which is a straight run. My mother's brother, Jimmy, whom I'm named after, was a policeman in Woodbridge, there wasn't a big police force at that time. So anyway, they go all the way to Rahway and when they got into Rahway they got stuck. They couldn't lift these big wheels and there they were downtown Rahway, these two young and immature girls. And a policeman

comes over and says who are you and this and that. Well my mother says, I'm Margaret Walsh and this is Julia Walsh. The policeman says Walsh, are you related to Jimmy Walsh the cop? She says yes that's my brother and he said alright come here and he called a couple of guys over and they lifted these wheels and got them out off the railings. I'm trying to say how neighborly or how small all of this is with the rails and the cop coming over and lifting and asking who are you and oh it's him from Woodbridge

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a trusting society.

*James Patten:* Yes, it's all a folksy thing. They lifted the wheels off the trolleys and said don't ride along the rails with these wheels. You're going to break the wheel and this and that. So they turned around and got scared and went all the way back to Woodbridge. And the next day they heard about it from their brother, the cop, because the cop in Rahway squealed on them after they begged him not to tell their brother. Jimmy Walsh was like me, he was 6'3" at least. I'd seen pictures of him. He was a big guy. So now the parents found out that they took this beautiful black horse and the wagon without permission. It's hard to imagine how that could be such a grievous thing today but I think it's analogous to like taking your father's.....

*Brenda Velasco:* It's a reflection of the time.

*James Patten:* Yes, like taking your father's Cadillac or something.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, without permission.

*James Patten:* And no license how's that! And you're like fourteen years old, two girls. At those times girl's who'd leave town or ride a horse by themselves, it was totally unheard of.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well we covered everything. You had some good stories for me so thank you very much.

*James Patten:* I like the story about the wagon.

*Brenda Velasco:* I do, too.

*James Patten:* Getting caught in the rails and then it's the cop and he knows the brother.

*Brenda Velasco:* It all comes out in the end doesn't it? But thank you very much, Jim Patten.

.....

After the formal interview concluded, Jim reminisced about Jack Fay, a former Councilman and State Senator and some advice he received. Jack said to always smile and wave when you saw people on the street, in church or in a store. They might not know who you are but they will recognize your face. Other political advice was that you should arrive early for a political meeting and don't drink. Then you can leave anytime and your departure won't be noticed since the others will be drinking.

Parents - His mother worked for the two newspapers: *The Woodbridge Leader* and later *The Woodbridge Independent Leader*. His father died when he was eighty years old and did not have Social Security benefits.

Ruth Wolk was a big name with *The Woodbridge Independent Leader* and a political powerhouse. She and Chief Keating were returning from Carteret when he accidentally killed a boy. The next day the Chief committed suicide.