

## Oral History Interview

John Bedner

WH002

(written transcript and digital audio)

John Bedner initially was interviewed on May 7, 2008 at Evergreen. Due to technical difficulties, he was interviewed a second time on May 27, 2009. In this second interview, Mr. Bedner was interviewed at the Evergreen Center by Brenda Velasco at 10:35 A.M. Participating in the interview were students from the Gifted and Talented Program: Sandra Souied of Port Reading (AMS), Regina Poerio of Port Reading (AMS), Kaitlin Murphy of Port Reading (AMS), Deanna Della Torre of Colonia (IMS), Julienne Viuya of Iselin (IMS), Ayushi Pathak of Iselin (IMS), Humza Farrukh of Avenel (AMS).

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, now we'll start the interview. Sandra you lead off with the first question.

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

*John Bedner:* My name is John Bedner. My date of birth is September 21, 1919. I lived in a section of Woodbridge that very little people know that it was ever a section of Woodbridge Township. This section was on the intersection of Highway #1 and Green Street, if you know where that is? It was called, in my youth, my childhood, Clifford Heights. They had a big sign out there, Clifford Heights.

*Brenda Velasco:* Like the *Big Red Dog*, Clifford.

*John Bedner:* Well there no dogs over there just me.

*Brenda Velasco:* No, but this is a kid's program.

*John Bedner:* Alright, Clifford Heights, yes. I was born in Perth Amboy. My birth was in Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Regina you're next.

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

*John Bedner:* Well, eighty-eight years.

*Brenda Velasco:* You're next Kaitlin.

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

*John Bedner:* This is a long story. In those days it was very rural. We went to the Farmer's Market in Perth Amboy, they had two markets there, and everybody would go with their satchels and go there to get live chickens and vegetables and everything else. There was no such a thing as Shop Rite and all those stores. So at the Farmer's Market my father was talking about the vegetables and everything else and this man said to him he knew of a small farm, about five acres, in Woodbridge. My father jumped at the chance and plans were made to move from Perth Amboy to Woodbridge. So with a horse and wagon borrowed from the farm where he was going to live, in two trips, he moved from Perth Amboy to this farm down in Woodbridge. Now this farm is

now where those big three story condos are down in the valley, more or less, at the Green Street circle. Do you know where the Green Street circle was?

*Brenda Velasco:* That's were **Staples** is.

*John Bedner:* Yes.

*Students:* Oh, okay.

*John Bedner:* Now if you see those big condos it's down like in the valley. When I was a boy there was a lake there. We used to go ice skating and everything else. Then through the years it gradually dried up and it was a swamp. After the swamp they filled it with sand and the gas company went down there and after the gas company went down there, no that was it, they moved and they built the condos down there and that's where I grew up. But ironically you mentioned **Staples** I met my wife, where **Staples** is now, that was their house. I can go on and on about that.

*Brenda Velasco:* So she lived quite near to you then?

*John Bedner:* Oh, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did she come in a horse and wagon from Perth Amboy too?

*John Bedner:* No she didn't, no, they lived in Carteret and they moved to that house where **Staples** is now.

*Brenda Velasco:* A lot has changed.

*John Bedner:* A lot has changed and in those days we didn't have cars or anything, we had roller skates and bicycles. In the evening a lot of guys would get together and we'd hang out, as you people know it now, we just got together.

*Brenda Velasco:* I think you're getting into some of our other questions. Who was next to ask a question, Deanna?

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

*John Bedner:* What time period are you interested in, because I can way back to the horse and wagons? So what do you want me to talk about the changes? That area is completely changed today. It was rural as rural can get. It was horse and wagons, it was trees and it was fields and farms, the whole area. You take Lafayette, Iselin and Woodbridge and that was all farmland. Changes, everything you see is changes now. What changes do you want me to talk about?

*Brenda Velasco:* You mentioned some of the changes already because where the condos are right now that used to be a lake where you swam in off of Green Street. But was Green Street paved?

*John Bedner:* Green Street was paved with concrete. It was a two lane highway.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so that one was paved.

*John Bedner:* That was paved. We roller skated on there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Now where did you go shopping?

*John Bedner:* Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Main Street Woodbridge?

*John Bedner:* Main Street Woodbridge, **Toborosky's**. My father used to take the fruits and vegetables down at **Toborosky's** store. Also, **Choper's**.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, and then you took the horse and wagon there?

*John Bedner:* Yes, horse and wagon. Let me tell you about the horse and wagon, after they delivered the goods down to the store sometimes my mother would ride the horse and wagon and she would just throw the reins on the horse. Believe it or not, that horse knew how to come up from Woodbridge up Green Street and turn in and go back into the barn. He just knew how to go that horse. And that was the only street going through, Green Street. Green Street ended in Iselin and then after Iselin that was Oak Tree Road but everything there was all dirt roads, dirt roads all over the place. U.S.#1 was not even thought about. It was a dirt road that went from Green Street toward Menlo Park, today Menlo Park. There was a trolley track that used to run around there. It went from New Brunswick to Elizabeth, trolley.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you ever take the trolley?

*John Bedner:* Oh, yes, we took the trolley to **Barnum & Bailey Circus**.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was that held?

*John Bedner:* In Elizabeth.

*Brenda Velasco:* In Elizabeth, okay.

*John Bedner:* Yes. It ran, what is now that eyeglass place on Highway #1, right in back of that. It ran parallel to U.S. #1.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay and there's tracks, well there's.....

*John Bedner:* Right there, there was a bridge. Like there is a bridge for the highway, there was a bridge for the trolley and that was scary because that was just a plain bridge and if you ever walked it there was nothing there and the biggest thing was if you could walk that trolley track without looking down, I mean just going, you were a big guy already, you know, you were a big boy, you graduated.

*Brenda Velasco:* So that's right behind Woodbridge Center now? Have you ever gone behind Woodbridge Center? You know where the lens place is on Route #1 and the Jewelry Exchange place and there are tracks down there.

*John Bedner:* Trolley tracks.

*Student:* Oh, by Woodbridge Center.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* You can't see the tracks anymore. That's where the trolley ran parallel to U.S. #1.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because most people are aware of Woodbridge Center.

*John Bedner:* I know, like I told you nobody knows that area there. That was like no man's land.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, I think Deanna also asked about houses of worship, were there any houses of worship there?

*John Bedner:* Not around my area. We went to St. James Church in Woodbridge. Walked too, always walked back and forth.

*Brenda Velasco:* Walked from where you lived.....

*John Bedner:* To church and back.

*Student:* I have a question. How many houses were there in Woodbridge when you were little?

*John Bedner:* In Woodbridge?

*Student:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* You're asking Woodbridge. Woodbridge is Woodbridge.

*Student:* Where you lived.

*John Bedner:* Where I lived, in that area?

*Student:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* How many houses?

*Student:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* Let me talk about that if you will. U.S. #1 divided, and I said that before last year, there was a colored section; we called them colored people, the blacks. And then on the Iselin side, where the whites lived, the highway seemed to be the difference between Woodbridge and Iselin and there was, oh you going to ask me the question about discrimination. Absolutely no discrimination, we treated each other like people. They would come down to the farm and get apples and milk and pears and all kinds of fruits and there was no such thing as black and whites, we were all just people. My best buddy was a little colored boy and we had wonderful times roaming the fields all together.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about the schools?

*John Bedner:* School, there was the Iselin School and here's another funny thing. Like I said, it was separated between Woodbridge and Iselin. We lived on the Iselin side of let's say the highway that was a dirt road then. But we went to Woodbridge School. All the rest around here, the neighbors, all went to the school in Iselin.

*Brenda Velasco:* So which school did you eventually.....

*John Bedner:* Woodbridge School No. 1.

*Brenda Velasco:* So that was as far as St. James Church then basically.

*John Bedner:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you walked it or was there a school bus?

*John Bedner:* Oh there was a school bus, **Raphael's School Bus**. That was a big laugh. That was like a box with a motor on it and let me tell you about that. The girls went home on the bus first and then the bus came back and picked up the boys and took the boys home. There was no mixing of boys and girls and we stayed at that school, No. 1, you know where No. 1 School is in Woodbridge?

*Student:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* There was a big clock, you know where the big clock, did you ever see the big clock that used to be there?

*Brenda Velasco:* They've taken that down.

*John Bedner:* They took it down because it wasn't safe anymore. But as kids waiting for the bus to come back to pick the boys up, we would scoot up that third floor and look out that little window of the clock. It was like this, the little window, and there was the big hands over there and that was a wonderful thing to have to see that big Woodbridge clock. I have a picture of the clock

and it tells when it was dismantled and everything else. The historians of Woodbridge should know that. What else about the schools?

*Brenda Velasco:* You went to high school?

*John Bedner:* Yes, Woodbridge High on Barron Avenue.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what year did you graduate.

*John Bedner:* '37.

*Brenda Velasco:* 1937, during the Depression.

*John Bedner:* Oh yes I know Depression, do you want to talk about that?

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, well we're coming up to that. Okay, next would be Julienne.

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

*John Bedner:* Nothing where I grew up. It was all rural, it was just rural. It was in between Iselin and Woodbridge. There was nothing there but houses and farmland.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was there a movie house in Iselin?

*John Bedner:* Iselin there was, years ago. Oh, yes. It's still there but it's not opened, but there was a movie. But we couldn't afford to go to the movies so there might as well have been ten of them because we didn't go. It was ten cents a movie.

*Brenda Velasco:* Julienne asked you about the post office, was there a post office that....

*John Bedner:* No, the post office was in Woodbridge, again, across the street from that church (United Methodist). You were assigned, there were a bunch of boxes, little square boxes, and our box number was P.O. Box 329, Woodbridge, New Jersey. You'd go there and you'd have to know the little piece to push and every noontime at lunchtime I would go and get the mail and then take it home. That's how we got the mail from the post office in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright so there was no mailman delivering your mail back then.

*John Bedner:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was there a firehouse on Green Street do you recall?

*John Bedner:* The firehouse was actually in Iselin by what used to be the station.

*Brenda Velasco:* But you were covered by Woodbridge?

*John Bedner:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay Julienne, did we cover everything there?

*Julienne:* Were there any libraries?

*John Bedner:* No, nothing but farmhouses.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, then I think we're going to go to Ayushi.

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

*John Bedner:* Well when we came home from school we undressed and went out in the fields and picked vegetables and weeded and worked. That was our

recreation. But actually, recreation, there was the woods. There was fifty acres of woods on the side of me and I was a boy of the woods. I knew every tree there, I knew every animal. I fed the squirrels, I fed the rabbits, I fed the pheasants and I was a nature boy actually. That was my recreation. There was no such a thing as clubs for this and clubs for that. Growing older we just got together and played baseball in an open field and that was about it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you have a bicycle?

*John Bedner:* I had a bike, let me tell you the story about the bike now. I had a bike and I painted that thing white and I made some stripes on it and I upholstered the seat with like a sheepskin, do you know what sheepskin is? At night we'd all gather and ride up and down Oak Tree Road which was maybe two or three cars would go through at night and this lady, girl, moved into where it is now **Staples**. So we got together and I said to her, would you like to ride on the bike. She said yes. So we didn't have things like girl's bikes and men's bikes we had men's bikes. So the girls would sit on the bar sideways, like sidesaddle on a horse and then we'd give them a ride. So I gave her a ride on my bike. Well, I had the classiest bike of everybody and she seemed to like the bike. So one thing led to another and we've been married sixty-seven years and it started from riding the bike on the street in the evening.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's quite an accomplishment.

*John Bedner:* We went together four years before we got married, so you figure seventy-one years I know her. I took her to the senior prom. My friends said who is John taking to the senior prom? I played football and I had hair then, nice black wavy hair. And they said, "Who is John taking to the senior prom?" Well when they found out it was nobody in the senior class, well that was something.

*Brenda Velasco:* She was younger than you?

*John Bedner:* No she was my same age.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, same age, okay.

*John Bedner:* Yes. Funny thing.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Humza.

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

*John Bedner:* There was no focal point in my community. You see, it was right between Iselin and Woodbridge and there was no focal point. A gas station I would say, if anything. There was one gas station and we all got together and fixed bicycles and talked and whatever.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was the gas station Mr. Bedner?

*John Bedner:* The gas station was Larry Marsh. It was where that religious bookstore is, that was Larry Marsh. He had trucks and gas stations. That was actually my first job where you had those great big high gas pumps and you'd pumped the gas up to the big high glass on it and then, through gravity, you would feed it to the cars.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Sandra.

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

*John Bedner:* I liked it because it was rural and even now it's quite rural but in those days it was really rural. It was fields and pathways and places where you could pick berries. We had berries of all kinds. We had the sandbanks which is now Woodbridge Center. That was the sandbanks, that's another story, where they got the clay for Woodbridge Township. The famous clay, best in the world, and we'd jump off that big high cliff on the sandbanks but it was just a wonderful place to grow up in, wonderful place. No fights, no dissensions, no nothing; everybody loved everybody and looked out for everybody. Plus, in those days, we couldn't just go to the emergency room if something happened. I remember one time I was playing in a little pond there where they made the highway and they had broken concrete down and it rolled into this little pond. I was in there through the mud and bare feet and everything else and through the suction I had my leg caught. And I pulled my foot up against the jagged concrete and I ripped my foot open from here to there, from my toe to heel. And where are you going to go to the doctor? There were no doctors. So we bandaged it up in tourniquets and everything else and by the time I went to the doctor it was too late to have stitches so I had to sit up there all year with it just trying to heal, but that's another story. But that's the idea, there were no doctors. Even today it's like if you want a blah, blah, blah, consult your doctor. Did you ever try to get a doctor? You don't get a doctor you get push one, push, three, push five and that's how you get a doctor and they don't know what the hell they're doing.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay. Next we're going to Regina.

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

*John Bedner:* Going back to when I was a boy there was a big train wreck on Pennsylvania Railroad right around where the **Dunkin Donuts** is now, at that intersection. It was loaded with cattle and this time it was loaded with pigs and the pigs got loose and there were hundreds of pigs that came in the woods toward our place down there in the hollow and we tried to catch a pig and we couldn't do that. They are mean when you're trying to catch them and my father never did manage to catch a pig but that was interesting. Then again on the intersection of U.S. #1 and Green Street, before it was ever a circle it was just a crossing, there used to be truckloads of produce coming. They used to be down there in the big Mack trucks with the chain drives, very slow, but they'd always get into an accident somehow and we'd always hear about it. One time it was a load of peaches so everybody got peaches. One time it was loaded with things for **Woolworth's Department Store** so we got a bunch of toys and whatnots. Next time it was meats. So between the accidents we kind of managed to live through the Depression somehow.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Kaitlin we're up to you.

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

*John Bedner:* Woodbridge today is still kind of rural. It's a place where they're trying to make things right by everybody. The roads are getting improved. I like it because of the police force. I had a few incidents and they were there right away, that's what I liked, and there are so many nice things about Woodbridge. There's an effort to keep Woodbridge clean. The mayor, I love the mayor, the present mayor, because he's everywhere. He should have been twins because every time I put on the television he's on there with baseball games, he's on there with the Road Department. He's there with everybody as opposed to some of the old mayors, that sat behind their desk and never did a thing. I've seen many a mayor, corrupt and everything else but I love this mayor.

*Brenda Velasco:* We'll have to tell him then. Okay, we're back to you Deanna.

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

*John Bedner:* I have a son, he lives with me. He's divorced and he lives with me.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where do you live now? Because it's not necessarily where you grew up in the hollow.

*John Bedner:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* You live on which street in Colonia?

*John Bedner:* Ravine Drive. That's right by the pond. After I moved from the farm I lived in Fords for fourteen years, when I got married. Then I moved to Colonia for what, fifty years now I guess. But I don't know much about Colonia because once I was there I was there, I didn't wander anymore and I only know really about my own section and about Woodbridge years ago.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well you covered it quite well. Julienne.

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

*John Bedner:* Any stories or events I'd like to discuss? You asked me something, I don't know what to tell you, like what have you in mind?

*Brenda Velasco:* Kaitlin.

*Kaitlin:* Did you ever go to the **Woodbridge Speedway**?

*John Bedner:* Oh sure, we couldn't afford a ticket so we just climbed up that high fence way in the back, and that was high, and in those days it was a racetrack and the thing that I liked they had Model T Fords and they had a big, what would you call them now that they have with the race cars? The bar over it and we'd play polo with the machines. And that's where the high school is now.

*Student:* The football field.

*John Bedner:* The football field, yes, that's where it was. Another thing, there was an airport up where I lived. Little old time airplanes used to come into the thing, they used to call it the apple orchard, because years before me somebody must have been growing apples because there were an awful lot of apples that



were discarded but they made it into a little airport. Every Sunday, Whitey Ford, I think it was Whitey Ford, used to jump out of the airplane. And it so happened that the way the wind was blowing and the way the thing was setup, he would always jump out over our little farmhouse and it was low. You could almost holler to him. He was on the wing ready to go and he would jump out. By the time he landed he would land near where the **Staples** is now, that was the airport up in that big field.

*Brenda Velasco:* Sandra.

### ***13. What do you know of the clay industry of New Jersey?***

*John Bedner:* Clay industry? Oh God, that's another hour I could tell you that. When I was a boy, the railroad that went past the farm was the Port Reading Railroad. Where, what was that one that just went out of business, the circle, it used to be the Nagy farm, it went off into the sandbanks. That was sandbanks where Woodbridge Center is now and clay. They had the donkeys and the carts that would grab the clay from the clay pits and bring it over to the railroad there and into the big boxcars they would unload the clay. From there it went, God knows where. But that was the clay and the sandbanks were where the clay was gotten from. That's where my boy, L.G., drowned one time because he went into the big holes that they used to dig the clay out of and they used to fill up with water, springs like even, and he drowned.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you went swimming there?

*John Bedner:* We used to swim in the old holes, yes. From School No. 1 we used to run up there and take a dip and then run back to school again at one o'clock or whatever. We ran like crazy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Don't influence these kids. Kaitlin, do you have another question?

*Kaitlin:* Did you witness the Woodbridge train wreck?

*John Bedner:* Oh yes, sure, on Fulton Street? Oh yes, that was a big thing that happened, the train wreck.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were you there?

*John Bedner:* Oh I went there with my parents but you couldn't get too near it because it was all, you know, emergency stuff but I had all those things at home, pictures of the train wreck in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Regina.

*Regina:* What was your job when you lived in Woodbridge?

*John Bedner:* When I lived in Woodbridge?

*Regina:* Yes.

*John Bedner:* My first job was in a chemical plant and it was called **Kalco** and then it was **American Cyanamid** and that was a wicked job. That was the Depression days and if you didn't know somebody to get you a job you never got a job. There they made chemicals and dyes and people used to come out of there- he's blue, he's red, he's green, all colors coming out of there. Their skin would turn colors. Today they would scream the EPA is it? They wouldn't allow such a thing and I had a job where I was unloading tank cars of sulfa and of chemicals and we would always have to have underpants, long johns, and

then overalls and goggles. If you were ever caught without a pair of goggles you got a day off, just like that, because at any time anything could happen. There was a gas attack and there was a chemical blown around the place. Then I would load and unload the tankers that were coming in. That was my first job. Then I got to know a little mechanics and then I worked in Perth Amboy making cables at **General Cable**. Then I went into the service after that. All my buddies were in the service. I could have gotten a deferment but I said, look it, they'll all come back from the war and I'll be the only guy that didn't go in the service. No, so I volunteered to go into the service. I spent two years in the Philippines.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were you in the Army or the Navy?

*John Bedner:* Army.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, unfortunately our time has run out.

*John Bedner:* I know. Like I said, I could talk forever. I mean ninety-years I have a lot.

*Brenda Velasco:* You have a lot to share. But I thank you from all of us.

*John Bedner:* You're very welcome.

*Brenda Velasco:* I'm very grateful you came back.