

Oral History Interview
John E. Jennings
WH049

(written transcript and digital audio)

On June 20, 2009, John E. Jennings was interviewed at the Independent Club of Colonia by Brenda Velasco at 11:35 A.M.

Brenda Velasco: I am interviewing Mr. Jennings who is a former member and current member of the Independent Club of Colonia located in Colonia on Delaware Avenue.

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

My name is John E. Jennings. I live on 102 West Pine Street in Colonia, New Jersey. My date of birth is April 21st, 1932.

2. How long have you lived in Colonia?

I have lived in Colonia for fifty-five years.

Brenda Velasco: So when did you move here?

John Jennings: '54.

Brenda Velasco: In 1954.

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

Well I moved. The family was already here; I married into the family. I came in '48.

Brenda Velasco: And what was your wife's maiden name?

John Jennings: Chambers.

Brenda Velasco: What was her first name?

John Jennings: Laura.

Brenda Velasco: Laura Chambers and you married her. In what year did you get married? Do you remember that?

John Jennings: 1955.

Brenda Velasco: 1955 and then she hooked you.

John Jennings: Yes, and been ever since.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we're glad. Where did you move from?

John Jennings: South River, New Jersey.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, which is still in Middlesex County.

John Jennings: Correct.

4. What did you like about living in your section of Woodbridge-Colonia?

My wife.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, that's important. Anything else you like about.....

John Jennings: Well, at the time I was more goo goo eyed and didn't see too much of anything else.

Brenda Velasco: You were in love.

John Jennings: Oh, yes, yes.

Brenda Velasco: You raised your family here then too.

John Jennings: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: How many children did you have?

John Jennings: Four.

5. *Independent Club of Colonia*

a. *How did you first learn of this Club?*

Well it was right on the corner from me. We could see it passing. I asked questions because the people across the street belonged to it.

b. *Why did you become a member?*

Brenda Velasco: When did you finally become a member, Mr. Jennings?

John Jennings: I don't remember the year.

Brenda Velasco: Was it soon after you moved here?

John Jennings: I couldn't say how soon after. I know it was before the lights and streets and etc. etc.

Brenda Velasco: Was your wife's family a member? Was the Chambers family a member?

John Jennings: I believe my mother-in-law was.

Brenda Velasco: Did they live on Pine Street too?

John Jennings: Yes, same house.

Brenda Velasco: Same house, okay.

John Jennings: She's still there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so you still have your mother-in-law then?

John Jennings: Yes, she's one hundred and four.

Brenda Velasco: My gosh!

John Jennings: Yes, one hundred and four.

Brenda Velasco: Genes run good in the Chambers family, my goodness.

c. *How long were you a member? What years?*

John Jennings: Of the Club?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John Jennings: I never was taken off the rolls I guess. I'm sort of what Sam (DuPree) was speaking of where we became, fell away I guess you'd say because.....

Brenda Velasco: Inactive.

John Jennings: Yes, I guess I'd say that.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so basically from the late fifties probably up to the present. So that's over forty years.

John Jennings: Being a member?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

d. *Did you hold any offices?*

John Jennings: Yes, I held quite a few but I don't remember.

Brenda Velasco: Because you could have been a secretary or a treasurer.

John Jennings: No, I wasn't a secretary, I know that.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

John Jennings: I'd tell you if I remembered. I had all those old papers not too long ago.
Brenda Velasco: Alright, you know, when you find them you give me a call because I'm going to give you my card.

e. What services did they provide for you and your family?

John Jennings: Well at the beginning we were not, how should I say, actually active in the old Independent Club; it became two clubs.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, I didn't realize that.

John Jennings: Yes, it wasn't always the club that it ended up being.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, I didn't realize there were two clubs.

John Jennings: Yes, when we first came it was the only Independent Club of Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John Jennings: And at that time, like I said there were no streets, no lights, no running water and no sewers. Then more and more people that came, when it started opening up, people coming in from New York and north Jersey or what have you, they saw that there were no streets or no lights etc. etc, so they tried their best to involve themselves in the old club so they can bring about this. But at that time, how should I say, the business structure or the politicians at that time had the folk believing if they gave them these.....

Brenda Velasco: Amenities, services.

John Jennings: Yes, well then their taxes would go up. They were living in a A number one zone paying the taxes anyway but they didn't understand that. You couldn't explain it to them so we had that sort of fight back and forth: the younger ones who came in against the older ones. They formed a citizens, what was it called?

Brenda Velasco: Civic club?

John Jennings: Yes, civic club, I think it was. That formed so it worked as two clubs for a while and the civic club became a thorn and we decided to fight the different situations. Then after everything sort of mended and we got all the amenities, like you said, the clubs came together and they formed one club again.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

John Jennings: It was awhile before that came about.

Brenda Velasco: Because they were fought out of fear that the taxes would go up.

John Jennings: Oh, yes. You know when you have folks you depend on and feel free with, I'd say once or twice a year, they would donate beer and a pig; they'd roast a pig, and they drank and took pictures together and everybody was happy. But it wasn't taking care of business. So when the younger ones came in they objected to that so it became a problem.

Brenda Velasco: At that time when you moved in, I know when I moved in the '60s I didn't have running water, I had well water. We had well water, just got rid of the septic tank, and transferred and if you weren't in a development this was true for a lot of Colonia at that time.

John Jennings: See ours was the problem because they were ready to blight the area because the sewers were running over into the well water. That's when Jack Fay became.....

Brenda Velasco: Yes, Jack Fay. (former Councilman, State Senator from Colonia)

John Jennings: Jack Fay was the one that got us involved in coming down to the meetings because they weren't going to blight the street, they were going to blight the

whole area. If he hadn't stepped in we would have been ousted because the area was considered the best of Woodbridge Township, Colonia. Because at that time we had another shopping center here, synagogue, church, middle school and the elementary school and they were getting ready to build the high school so everything was within walking distance. (CHS was built in 1967)

Brenda Velasco: Yes, this was a great location.

John Jennings: The location was great so they were working on ousting us at the time but Fay was the one that just started and he got us to where they didn't blight the area. They fixed it so we had running water.

Brenda Velasco: Which was necessary.

John Jennings: Yes, it had to be. We wouldn't have gotten it if it wasn't actually a necessity but that's the way it was.

Brenda Velasco: Well you gave us a lot of detail about that.

f. What were some memorable events or activities that you recall?

Brenda Velasco: Parties or anything here.

John Jennings: Well the young people used to have dances. They used the school parking lot once a year in the summer time. They even had bus rides and dances once a year at the firehouse. They even had after school programs for kids who couldn't read or write etc. The teachers donated time, some from in town and some from out of town who would come and tutor the kids in the area who wished to come.

Brenda Velasco: So this was a great boom for the young people, young children?

John Jennings: Yes, well the whole mixture because you got to go to the card parties for the elders also, and things such as that. Because there was the need, there was no other place except the clubhouse.

Brenda Velasco: There was no community center in Colonia at that time either. This was it; this was it for the kids.

John Jennings: Right.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else that you can recall about activities? Did you have barbeques?

John Jennings: Oh, yes, that also.

Brenda Velasco: Can't forget barbeques.

John Jennings: Yes, that was the continuation. They had that when we first came.

g. Why do you think membership declined?

John Jennings: Well they were considered a need at the time. As long as the need was there, the membership stayed but once they thought there was no longer a need.....

Brenda Velasco: It started to decline.

John Jennings: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: When did you see that decline occurring, in the 1980s or 1990s?

John Jennings: Yes, I guess. With the dates I can't even begin to guess.

Brenda Velasco: Alright.

6. While you lived in Colonia did you experience any significant happenings- construction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination?

John Jennings: Did I experience any significant happenings? Like constructions like what?

Brenda Velasco: Highways or Parkway.....?

John Jennings: Well the Parkway.

Brenda Velasco: Were you here when it was.....

John Jennings: No, the house was on where the Parkway is; the house that we live in. It was moved off the area where the Parkway was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so the house that you live in on Pine Street.

John Jennings: Yes, but I wasn't there then, the family was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, your in-laws house.

John Jennings: Right.

Brenda Velasco: The Chambers house was moved from the Parkway. Well it wasn't the Parkway it was moved to the current address at 102 West Pine Street to make way for the Parkway. And that seemed to have impact on this (area) because it split.

John Jennings: Right.

Brenda Velasco: You got West Pine Street and East Pine Street.

John Jennings: Correct.

Brenda Velasco: And some of the other streets too were on the other side in back of, I guess, **Dave's Hardware**. But at one time it was the **A&P**; you had an **A&P** there.

John Jennings: Right.

Brenda Velasco: When you moved here was Colonia Middle School built? (1960)

John Jennings: Middle School was here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

John Jennings: And then the senior high was here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so that was relatively new and what schools did you children attend?

John Jennings: All the elementary here; School #17 I think it was called at the time right here.

Brenda Velasco: Right here at Evergreen. So they just had to hop out of bed and they were in school.

John Jennings: They still were late.

Brenda Velasco: That was ideal.

John Jennings: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Then the Middle School was another few blocks away.

John Jennings: Then the high school.

Brenda Velasco: Then by that time the high school had been built. Colonia High School had been built (1967). Okay, so this was a prime location.

John Jennings: Yes, okay, construction of houses. On the houses over here, when we came there were only two, I think, on our street, two to three. Three, I think, was on our street. But the houses that were constructed, at a later date, one on our street and two on the next street over, I think, about five houses. I come to find out were illegally built. The contractor who built them forged the names of the people in the area and when we found out so many years later they said they didn't want to oust anyone but the people still should not be in them if they were illegally built and the contractor who built them went bankrupt afterwards but he went back in business later on. I found out because, at the time, in order to find out what was going on in the community so we would be up on

things. We had people calling up from the Jaycees and the Chamber and we also had the Citizen's Advisory Committee in which we became active in Woodbridge Township. I was a member of that and the Board of Education meetings so we could know what was going on in Woodbridge Township so we could stay active. That's when I found out about the illegality of the houses that were built. They were 40 X 100 and then you had to call and send a letter to people that were in two hundred feet that they were building. I lived across the street from one of them and we never received that. Oh yes, they said, and then they started checking and said it was impossible. I said it was not impossible. They came to find out who it was and that they never sent out letters to the families in the area. They received letters but did not send any to the people. So those houses were actually built illegally.

Brenda Velasco: But this wasn't your house?

John Jennings: No, no.

Brenda Velasco: The houses that came to be built.....

John Jennings: Afterwards.

Brenda Velasco: Who was the developer? Do you remember?

John Jennings: I don't remember his name. I used to talk to him and we got to be very good friends. It was years later and then I found out what he was doing. Dave, I think his name was Dave something.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, but the people are still in those houses.

John Jennings: Yes, they could have been uprooted years ago but it didn't make any sense.

Brenda Velasco: And you had to fight for these people? How did these people.....

John Jennings: I don't even know if they know what they were in. When we came back they had been in the community for quite a while. It was years later when we found out.

Brenda Velasco: When did you find out that these homes were illegal, in the 1990s?

John Jennings: No, it was not long. It was when I was still active in the club. That was the reason I was in the Citizen's Advisory Committee because the club saw that and we got involved.

Brenda Velasco: So it promoted political awareness too.

John Jennings: Quite a bit. Things that we learned, because in that community, they had someone come to you from the township once a month at your meeting to tell you about different parts of the township and what they were going to do. We saw things ten years in advance. The development and the plans you were able to see on that committee. I didn't understand plans but I expected that things were being done but some of the real estate people that were on there were aware like Woodbridge Township. Like with Woodbridge Center they knew in advance that that was coming. Like I'm say, in this area, being a part of that Citizen's Advisory Committee and the Junior Chamber, we were able to know things that were being developed.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, it kept you abreast of what was happening because government moves slow. It may take five years but it will happen and you had the strip malls coming in down here.

John Jennings: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So you were aware of what was going on.

7. What do you like about Colonia today?

John Jennings: Compared to when we came, it's eighty percent better. The things that came in to Colonia, the conveniences that came into Colonia, other than those that were here. The togetherness, I guess, became much better over the years. We were kind of distant before because the houses were.....

Brenda Velasco: You didn't have so many people.

John Jennings: No, no, and the same going up, the further you would go up you didn't have people. Then they started in.

Brenda Velasco: What were some of the conveniences that you like that are in this area?

John Jennings: That I have here?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John Jennings: I can walk to wherever I want just about. That's something big.

Brenda Velasco: Do you ever go to Evergreen?

John Jennings: No, no I don't. I've been going for years and I haven't gotten there yet.

Brenda Velasco: They've got a lot of programs there.

John Jennings: I know. I've got friends there.

Brenda Velasco: Well, you've just got to walk over a little bit more for that.

John Jennings: The only walking I do is to the bathroom and that's because I have to; that's my problem. I don't exercise; none at all. That's bad. You're telling on me now.

Brenda Velasco: Alright and you have enough stores here.

John Jennings: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have a library here when you first came here?

John Jennings: Not when we first came, no. (Henry Inman Library was built was 1966)

Brenda Velasco: Okay, because the library is just down Inman.

8. Do you still have any family member living in Colonia or Woodbridge today?

John Jennings: Yes, my two daughters and grandson.

Brenda Velasco: Where do they live?

John Jennings: Across from us.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so you've got an extended family there.

John Jennings: Yes, my wife passed and my brother moved out.

Brenda Velasco: I hope they keep an eye on you or you keep an eye on your grandson.

John Jennings: Yes, we have to keep an eye on each other.

Brenda Velasco: That's what family is all about.

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

John Jennings: None that I can think of.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, well I thank you very much Mr. Jennings. It was nice meeting you.

John Jennings: Same here.

Brenda Velasco: And I'm glad you walked down here.

John Jennings: No, I didn't walk.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, you cheated, okay.

John Jennings: I drove down.

Brenda Velasco: You drove down. Well you could also drive across to Evergreen during the week then and see some of your friends and get out of the house. They've got a lot of activities there.

John Jennings: Yes, I'm very active I'd say in Rahway also. I've been in Rahway most of my time.

Brenda Velasco: Why did you choose Rahway?

John Jennings: For my activities?

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John Jennings: Church.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, okay. What church do you belong to?

John Jennings: Ebenezer AME. (Central Avenue, Rahway)

Brenda Velasco: So that's the focal point for you and that's the hookup for you in Rahway. Well, thank you again and enjoy the rest of the day.

John Jennings: Okay.

