

Oral History Interview
John M. Mitch
WH113

(Written transcript and digital audio)

On Tuesday, July 30, 2013 John M. Mitch was interviewed by Brenda Velasco at 2:00 P.M. in the Council Chambers of Town Hall.

Brenda Velasco: I have the good fortune to be able to interview a very long time resident, though he's too young to qualify for the township oral project, John Mitch our Municipal Clerk.

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

Brenda Velasco: John, the first question. You're going to identify yourself and your date of birth which once again you're too young for this project but you've got some very, very good memories of the section that you grew up in.

John M. Mitch: John M. Mitch. Date of birth is September 8th, 1961.

Brenda Velasco: The year I graduated from high school and we're dealing with the section that you grew up in which was.....

John M. Mitch: Avenel.

2. How long have you lived in the Avenel section of Woodbridge?

John M. Mitch: Since 1961.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

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

Brenda Velasco: I know your mom didn't grow up in Avenel though; she moved to Avenel. So why did your family move to that part of Woodbridge?

John M. Mitch: Both of my parents came from Newark and at the time Avenel was a section that was starting to develop in Woodbridge Township with brand new housing and of course good loans were offered to members of the armed services. So my parents came down to Avenel where many homes were not built and looked for a new start.

Brenda Velasco: About what year did they move to Avenel?

John M. Mitch: 1956. (After the interview, John stated that his family moved from an apartment in Irvington to the new home on Woodruff in 1959 – the day after Thanksgiving)

Brenda Velasco: That was when we had the big housing boom not only in Avenel but Colonia and a couple of other sections, Fords as well. (After the interview, John mentioned that his mother traveled to a real estate company in Perth Amboy to put a \$5 down payment on the construction of their new home and obtained a VA loan for the purchase price of \$13,500)

John M. Mitch: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So they came in 1956 (1959) and I know you have many siblings.

John M. Mitch: There are five of us total. The first four of us were all born in Newark and all five of us were raised here Avenel. The fifth was born at Rahway

Hospital. (After the interview, John corrected this statement and stated all children were born in Newark)

Brenda Velasco: As you said after World War II there was a new start. I know '45 was the end of World War II but 1956 was that suburban boom. So you grew up in a relatively new community. What street did your parents move to by the way?

John M. Mitch: I grew up on Woodruff Avenue where my mother still lives today. I recall growing up on Woodruff Avenue when it was still a dirt road.

Brenda Velasco: A dirt road?

John M. Mitch: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! When they moved did they have well water or city water?

John M. Mitch: City water.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so they had that already. Were there a lot of houses on your street?

John M. Mitch: Well they're all built in a very similar style. Woodruff Avenue itself was built after the very street I live on now which is Ella Avenue. I moved one hundred and fifty feet where our backyards touch. But Ella Avenue was developed first so Woodruff Avenue were the first newer homes. They were built as a development there all at the same time.

Brenda Velasco: Now was this built at the same time as the section by **General Dynamics** such as Harvard? Which section came first?

John M. Mitch: I don't know but I would believe the college town section came first.

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

Brenda Velasco: What services, and I know you were young then, did you have in the township at that time growing up, the late '50s early '60s? Was there garbage pickup?

John M. Mitch: Yes, we had everything that we still have today probably with the exception of street sweeping because the roads were dirt.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have a library?

John M. Mitch: The library at the time was on Avenel Street. Today it operates as the YMCA Daycare next to Avenel Street School 4 and 5.

Brenda Velasco: How about stores? Did you have any stores?

John M. Mitch: I really believe the first department store ever to be in Avenel was **Kmart**.

Brenda Velasco: Oh wow! That's on St. Georges Avenue.

John M. Mitch: St. Georges Avenue. We had easy access to **Bradlees** but that was Colonia and **EJ Korvettes** which was Woodbridge. We did commonly think they were within our town because I believe you know coming from the family I do we always look at things as a fire district so those stores were within the Avenel fire district but different zip codes. **Kmart** I clearly think even to this day is the only department store we've ever had.

Brenda Velasco: You're right.

John M. Mitch: Now there were many other shops that we shopped in which I recall, as an example.....

Brenda Velasco: Yes, that's what I want to know those other shops, too.

John M. Mitch: **R&S Shoes** was a store on St. Georges Avenue currently across the street from the **Hess Gas Station** in Colonia. **R&S Shoes** was set up similar to a library where there were floor to ceiling shoe boxes and ladders floor to ceiling that just swung on wheels and that's where everybody bought their shoes if you were looking for a local shop.

Brenda Velasco: And even if you came from Colonia.

John M. Mitch: Oh, absolutely.

Brenda Velasco: Because I went there, too.

John M. Mitch: It was a very large shop. Then there were some stores you could buy jeans in, jeans and some tops for both young boys and girls not really men and women as much and that was called **Tops & Bottoms**. **Tops & Bottoms** was on St. Georges Avenue in the area of what we know today as **Denny's**.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, any other stores?

John M. Mitch: Retail stores?

Brenda Velasco: Retail, food....

John M. Mitch: Well, yeah, that was it there. We had two supermarkets. At one point we had **Fine Fair** which today is a print shop on Avenel Street located across from **Sorrento's Pizzeria** and then there was one other grocery store on Avenel Street across from School 4 and 5. Now the name escapes me, Brenda, but I believe you spoke to Rose Mirkovich who lived right next door to that. (Interview 24)

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John M. Mitch: That was a little bit larger. Today that serves as a professional building. It was quite larger than the other one and the big difference was the one near Rose's home had a considerable parking lot. The Avenel Street had no off street parking.

Brenda Velasco: And we know that that is critical for any future growth.

John M. Mitch: Absolutely. Then we were serviced by quite a few local delicatessens. When you live in Avenel you're kind of broken up into three sections. If you're in the section between 35 and Route 1.....

Brenda Velasco: And that's the section you live in.

John M. Mitch: Right, then you're at the section between Route 1 and the railroad tracks and then from the railroad tracks towards Rahway Avenue. So when you speak about the first one between 35 and Route 1 we had a place called **Saracins**. Now it had a nickname of **Dirty Johns**.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, you better explain that one.

John M. Mitch: That served as a deli; a place where you could go buy milk, bread and cigarettes and in the back of **Saracins** were pool tables. You had to be eighteen years of age to buy cigarettes or present a letter from your parents and you had to be at least eighteen to go into the pool hall. Also on that side of the highway we had a **Stern's**, which was also a deli, and that was owned by Isabel Stern and her family. That today exists as a little, I believe, electrical business. That's on Demarest Avenue and that serviced a lot of that side of Avenel Street. In fact I remember when Isabel Stern died, they were very good to the community, the fire company sent a card that they were planting a tree in her memory in Israel. Then on the other side of Route 1 there was the **Metro Deli** which today would be at the Pumpkin Patch location right next to the Avenel First Aid Squad. That was the **Metro Deli** that serviced much of

that side of the highway. There were others but these are the ones that were long term.

Brenda Velasco: So you had a business community there, a commercial downtown area.

John M. Mitch: Yeah, absolutely. In fact right now on the corner of St. Georges and Avenel Street, where **Chase Bank** is, before it was a bank there was a, a lack of better terms, a strip of stores that faced St. Georges Avenue. The first one and the most prominent at that time was **Charlie's Sugar Bowl**. **Charlie's Sugar Bowl** had everyday items. There were no cold cuts but you could get milk and you could get bread. You could get other staples around the house but you were also able to buy some school supplies; I can picture a school supply area. You were able to buy colognes and fragrances, some hygiene projects and they actually had a soda fountain bar inside. I think it had about six stools. Adjacent to that, separated only by a very narrow aisle, you had a hardware store; you had Pete the barber and **Thelma's Bakery**.

Brenda Velasco: There was a bakery.

John M. Mitch: Yes, then it became **Sabrina's**. **Thelma's** though was owned by Betty and Sam. In fact their daughter Pam I just saw and I just saw their granddaughter recently. They were the only retail bakery that I know of that we had in Avenel that had at least a large selection. There was a small bakery at one point on Rahway Avenue but it was more wholesale and offered a very small retail counter. But **Thelma's** did everything on site and had a very big display area for retail.

Brenda Velasco: So you had the hardware store, you had a bakery, you had a barbershop, you had **Kmart** and you had food stores.

John M. Mitch: Well **Kmart** came in the '70s and replaced what then was called **RCA**, the Radio Communications Company.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, right. That's where **RCA** was.

John M. Mitch: Yes, **RCA** was there so that's when **Kmart** came in. And as you probably know, **Pathmark** is partly in Avenel but most of the store is in Rahway, two different counties. Also interesting is we had three hardware stores in addition to the one on St. Georges in Avenel. Right across from **Costello Funeral Parlor** on Avenel Street what used to be **Pewter Pot Florist**, which you know was owned by Joanne and Joe Bulla, prior to them that was **Schlesinger's Hardware**. The third hardware was on Rahway Avenue right now where **Avenel Locksmith** is that used to be **Avenel Hardware** (corner of Rahway Avenue and Avenel Street). I used to remember going in there with my father and we would buy grass seed by the bag.

Brenda Velasco: Scoop it into a bag.

John M. Mitch: Right. One of the other things we had in Avenel, and again we had a lot on our side of the highway, today where **Rising Up Garden Center** is that was **Carallo's Vegetable Market**. They had the freshest of produce and vegetables that you could buy. They were a local family and I was probably in high school when that was still operational before it became **TQ's** which was a very large restaurant.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, right. It was **TQs**.....

John M. Mitch: **TQs**. It was owned by Tom Quigley from Iselin.

Brenda Velasco: I remember that restaurant. So Avenel has gone through vast changes.

John M. Mitch: A lot of changes.

Brenda Velasco: And lost a lot of their.....

John M. Mitch: A lot of business.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of business.

John M. Mitch: Yeah, a lot of the mom and pop. The mom and pop was huge you know because at one point.....you know like then **Krauszer's** was built and before it was **Krauszer's**, the first name when it was built, was called **Stop**; it was **Stop Convenience Stores**. Where **Bellini's** is right now I remember when that was just all wooded area and there was just one small home that sat in the deep part of the woods there. And I remember prior to the construction of that strip mall the fire department used that for a training drill. Now Avenel Street also has **Introcaso Cleaners** however that's not at its original location. Where it's at now I believe came in the early '70s. It originally was on Avenel Street one building in from Route 1. Just so you're familiar with it do you know on Route 1 on my side of the highway on Avenel Street as you're going towards Route 1 the very last white building there's like a psychic reader and there were some hair salons.....

Brenda Velasco: Right, right.

John M. Mitch: That was the original **Introcaso Cleaners**.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so now they have parking.

John M. Mitch: You know the building where they used to be had parking in the back but it shared it with apartments upstairs. So I don't know how many people were able to park in the back plus back then you were able to park on Avenel Street. I don't recall it being a problem.

Brenda Velasco: It wasn't as crowded either and now it's a main thorough fare.

John M. Mitch: Absolutely.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we sort of combined Question 4 with 5 but we're bouncing back to 4 as far as houses of worship.

John M. Mitch: We right now have three and had four that I recall. Right now we have **St. Andrew's Church**, we have the Presbyterian Church and we also have a Baptist Church, that's the one on Wiley Street. Where **Comcast** is today on Lord Street was once a Temple. (Congregation B'nai Jacob est. 1921)

Brenda Velasco: And then that Temple merged with Colonia. (Congregation B'nai Jacob merged with Temple Beth Am of Colonia in 1977 and became Temple Ohev Shalom)

John M. Mitch: With Colonia's Temple, that is correct.

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

Brenda Velasco: How about the schools.

John M. Mitch: We have three public schools right now. We have School 4 and 5 which is the oldest grammar school.

Brenda Velasco: Still functioning.

John M. Mitch: Still functioning. We have School 23 which was opened in 1960 and then what is today called Avenel Middle School opened up as Avenel Junior High School in 1964. In between those two dates for a period of time it was no

longer a junior high. Before it became a middle school it was an actual Avenel learning center all operated under the school district.

Brenda Velasco: And what schools did you attend?

John M. Mitch: 23 and Avenel Junior High.

Brenda Velasco: And your son just graduated.

John M. Mitch: My daughter from Avenel Middle School.

Brenda Velasco: Daughter, okay. Kelly just graduated from Avenel Middle School with honors.

John M. Mitch: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So that makes you very proud. And what high school did you go to then?

John M. Mitch: Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, going back to the post office was the post office.....

John M. Mitch: The post office as far as I always remember has always been on Rahway Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And you have been heavily involved with the firehouse.

John M. Mitch: Correct.

Brenda Velasco: Commissioner.....

John M. Mitch: Commissioner, chief, president.....

Brenda Velasco: And your father was also.....?

John M. Mitch: My father was a member there as well. His highest rank that he ever served was outside warden which was his title at the time which today is probably equivalent to a lieutenant.

Brenda Velasco: And the firehouse has always been in that location?

John M. Mitch: During my lifetime but that's not the original location.

Brenda Velasco: Where was the original location?

John M. Mitch: Remsen Avenue in Avenel. It served as both, at one point, a public school and the firehouse.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! And you just celebrated the 100th Anniversary which was successful except for the cicadas. (17 year cycle)

John M. Mitch: Right, that's true.

Brenda Velasco: This was the year. Okay, so we've got the schools and we've got the libraries how about the parks?

John M. Mitch: We have four parks. We have Crystal Avenue Park, we have Frank G. Pelzman Memorial Park.....

Brenda Velasco: Which was formally Avenel Park.

John M. Mitch: Right. We have the James F. Singer Park which is formally Prospect Park named after an Avenel resident and we have 5th District Park which is across from the Avenel First Aid Squad and we have a lot of state owned buildings in Avenel. We have Weights and Measures, we have the Adult Diagnostic Center, we have the Youth Diagnostic Center, we have the prison.....

Brenda Velasco: Which is over a hundred years old.

John M. Mitch: Right, 1896 the prison was built as a reformatory. That was its original purpose. It didn't become a prison until 1956 and we have the Woodbridge Developmental Center for the disabled.

Brenda Velasco: I didn't realize how much state owned property you had in Avenel.

John M. Mitch: I know for years many people have always said, you know if it was a state facility why is it always in Avenel?

Brenda Velasco: You have a collection

John M. Mitch: We have our fair share.

Brenda Velasco: And then you have the warden's house.

John M. Mitch: Warden's house across the street, yes. I remember at one point growing up as a child with the children of both the warden and the post master. The warden was Mr. Fenton who lived one block from us and the postmaster was Mr. Wilson who lived one block from us. Both African American gentlemen.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Question 6.

John M. Mitch: When I just saw your questions for the first time Question 6 is a very interesting question because Avenel had and continues to have no organized sport organizations. We don't have Little League, we don't have soccer, we don't have basketball; they just never existed.

Brenda Velasco: That's unusual because Colonia, Hopelawn, Fords.....

John M. Mitch: Iselin, Woodbridge.....

Brenda Velasco: Port Reading.

John M. Mitch: No, Port Reading doesn't have.....oh yeah they have football.

Brenda Velasco: Yeah.

John M. Mitch: We have never had organized sports.

Brenda Velasco: That's unique.

John M. Mitch: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And yet your son is an outstanding athlete.

John M. Mitch: Because we have to go to Woodbridge, Colonia and everywhere else. However to answer the question for recreation what we did was we either played at the park which at the time was Crystal Park. Or the other thing we did a lot for recreation locally, unless you had to travel somewhere, we rode our bikes. We rode our bikes not only on the streets because you were okay to do so. In Avenel, again on our side of the highway, there were two areas where we had bike trails. The first area is on Woodbine Avenue across from Avenel Middle School. Before Woodbridge Village apartments were built, it was a densely populated forest. It was the greatest when it came for that. The kids went in, made trails and there was never a problem.

Brenda Velasco: That was a ball.

John M. Mitch: It was. You know, you didn't really have answering machines really then. They were still becoming new so you called a friend and if you friend wasn't home to answer the phone and you went by his house and he wasn't there on his bicycle, you took your bike to the bike trails because that's where you met up. Then only a block away on Leesville Avenue where Colonia Gardens is was the same thing. It was a very wooded area and bicycle paths were made.

Brenda Velasco: So you had a lot of area that was open to you.

John M. Mitch: None of those apartments existed.

Brenda Velasco: And your mother just said you just run out and then those were the rules.

John M. Mitch: Well that's also interesting. Those were the rules but there was one big rule you had to be home before what I called *the about 7:00 P.M. fire alarm test* went in. There were three areas in Avenel that had sirens related to the fire department so you could hear the sirens regardless of what side of the highway you were on. That was a nightly test that went in at seven o'clock. We called it *the about seven o'clock test*. When that alarm went in, you really needed to be home but with a little leeway you had to head home; and quite frankly we were never across Avenel Street you were on our side of Avenel. So you were home within minutes anyway but that was the rule.

Brenda Velasco: A lot more freedom.

John M. Mitch: Yes. You know what was interesting also with Route 1, which I've always known as Route 1 because it used to be referred as the Super Highway, Route 1 separated Avenel. It was a significant separation because if you didn't have a tie to something else across the highway like the church you didn't know children your age because of the two different grammar schools. So your first interaction for most of us was at junior high school because then both sides of Avenel then went to Avenel Junior High and then you continued through high school in all cases. Today of course it's much different where people go to different high schools.

Brenda Velasco: For you growing up. Now prior for some other much older residents they went to Keasbey or somewhere.

John M. Mitch: Oh, okay, and plus had split sessions.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, so you were fortunate. The kinks were starting to disappear by that time with the educational system. Did you want to add anything else for recreation?

John M. Mitch: I think that was it. I just found it interesting that you questioned it because we don't have organized sports.

7. What was the focal point of your community?

Brenda Velasco: I remember you mentioned your father was in the fire department and you were in the fire department. Were there other places where you could congregate or families could?

John M. Mitch: There weren't but back then if you were a member of the family fire department you periodically attended picnics that the fire department either held at a park or on the land behind the **Maple Tree Tavern**.

Brenda Velasco: And that's Ann.....

John M. Mitch: Right, Pichalski. The only other really option was if you belonged, and we did you know, to church. There were often events that you would go to sponsored by your church. Some of the community things that brought us together in Avenel were really limited. One that I do remember and again it goes back to the fire department is for quite some time annually the fire department held for a week at a time the carnival and it was on their site when the old firehouse was there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, on Remsen Avenue.

John M. Mitch: No, on Route 1 and Avenel Street.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, okay.

John M. Mitch: Because at the time it was a smaller building and we also owned that whole triangle intersection there. A lot of it was there since it was a single family

home which was left to the fire department. When Henry Luskie died he had owned it. Henry Luskie left the house to the fire department and then all became eventually macadam but that's where we held carnivals.

Brenda Velasco: And that would be a community event to draw all of Avenel together.

John M. Mitch: Everybody together, yes.

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

John M. Mitch: Well I think one of the benefits is that I came from a large family of five which was very typical at that time especially probably in an Irish/American family. You know everybody had five kids it seemed and being that we were somewhat close in age but far enough.....we were able to meet nonstop families. I mean we knew everybody and everybody knew us. It was good thing so you felt like you could walk the streets and you knew somebody or they knew you. You know even as a paperboy I delivered the newspaper probably at the age of twelve and I delivered to... (Carol and Jack Hila)..... Today it's *The Home Tribune* but back then it was *The News Tribune*, actually at one point it was the *Perth Amboy Evening News*, and that was when it was a four o'clock newspaper so it was delivered after school because it was printed during the day while we were at school. It wasn't printed overnight for the morning addition. So I know myself I covered that whole side between Route 1 and 35 and Avenel Street and Woodbine so to me it was probably a large route at the time for just being one person. Again that's how you got to meet people. But I enjoyed that and again also seeing that everyone we grew up with belonged to the same church so we saw everybody more on a constant basis than today where everybody is split going totally different ways.

Brenda Velasco: So it was like a small town feeling.

John M. Mitch: It was definitely a small town feeling and as you had said earlier we had everything. We had the deli, we had the bakery, we had the barbershop and we had the dentist. Dr. Rummage originally opened up on Avenel Street near us, not where he is today across the other side of Route 1. His original location was in the 500 block of Avenel Street across from **Introcaso Cleaners**. So again we had everything right there.

Brenda Velasco: You could walk to a lot.

John M. Mitch: We could walk to everything with the only exception of a small town doctor who was Dr. Gonella who was everybody's DO. He was on Avenel Street but he was about one block away from the firehouse so you had to for the most part drive. Now you also just said walk. When we grew up we had one car for the seven of us. So if it was my father's turn to drive to work that week, he alternated with my uncle and then we didn't have a car. We'd take the bus with my mother and go into Perth Amboy to shop because Woodbridge Center didn't exist.

Brenda Velasco: What bus did you take, do you remember?

John M. Mitch: I think it was Bus 62 but I could be wrong. It picked us up on 35 and Chain O Hills Road and brought us into Perth Amboy and we shopped on Smith Street.

Brenda Velasco: Okay because you had bus service as well from Avenel.

John M. Mitch: We did have bus service, yes.

Brenda Velasco: And I remember previous interviewees always mentioned you had the bus service. Did you have the train service too?

John M. Mitch: Well we had trains. I mean Avenel train station has been there for a long time but we didn't utilize that as a family you know for any purpose let alone shopping.

Brenda Velasco: And you mentioned that your dad alternated with your uncle. I guess they worked at the same place?

John M. Mitch: Right. Going back to where we came from my father and my uncle, who was from Linden (I think I told you Sunnyside), they both worked in Newark. So one week my father would pick him up and drive to Newark and bring him back home or my uncle from Linden would come to Avenel and pick up my father and go to Newark. That's how he worked it, too, where my uncle would leave his car at home during the day for my aunt and they had four children.

Brenda Velasco: And families were big back then.

John M. Mitch: Yes.,

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

John M. Mitch: I actually made a couple of notes.

Brenda Velasco: Good.

John M. Mitch: Again without even knowing these were your questions. I think the biggest, and it is in my memory as clear as today is, I'll never forget Thanksgiving of 1971 the prison riots at what then was called **Rahway State Prison** which today, well it changed in 1988, to **East Jersey State Prison**. In fact, when I was thinking about that today, its twenty-five years this year that it's been called **East Jersey State Prison**.

Brenda Velasco: And most of us still make the mistake of calling it **Rahway Prison**.

John M. Mitch: I think most of us do unless you live in Rahway where you call it **East Jersey State Prison** because it was a stigma. The people from Rahway protested that because it was a stigma that they had.

Brenda Velasco: And what stands out about that? How come you were involved?

John M. Mitch: The reason it stands out is two-fold. One is because it was Thanksgiving Day. I remember my mother making dinner, having relatives over you know with the five children home and the fire alarm went in. My father left the house as a fireman and went to the prison fire. I remember as child, so I would have been ten years old, sitting at the TV and all watching live news coverage of the prison riots. Now from our perspective you know we saw it as a fire and you know that's what we were watching. I don't know that at ten I realized the impact of what was going on but if you recall there were five hundred inmates that held six people hostage during that riot; that particular riot wasn't the first one there but that was the one of '71, and also in those hostages they included the warden. There were six officers who were injured and three were stabbed and that riot lasted twenty-four hours. Since then I've had several opportunities to be inside the prison. Once, you know, I joined the fire department myself periodically we'd have fire alarms there and real fires. Just to talk about the prison for one other moment. Another thing about living in Avenel is something that you generally do not think about but every now and then when we

were younger you know you probably thought about it a little more were possible escapes. It was always rumored at times there was a possible escape but I remember also in 1972, a year after the riots, that three convicted murderers and again although we like to think we're not close to the prison from where I live you follow those railroad tracks near the prison and the railroad tracks are going to take you real quickly onto the other side of Avenel so you are a lot closer than you think.

Brenda Velasco: You're right, you don't think about those things.

John M. Mitch: No, no.

Brenda Velasco: But it's there.

John M. Mitch: Right, and you know again not to continue too long on the prison but if you remember in 1978 it was just before I was getting out of high school, a year before, they filmed that award winning *Scared Straight*. Then the prison's architecture has been used in quite a few movies which I guess the most prominent was *Ocean's Eleven* with George Clooney, Matt Damon and Brad Pitt. I remember when they filmed that because my sister-in-law's sister waited outside the property lines of the prison trying to get a picture of George Clooney.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else?

John M. Mitch: Yes, when you say construction I do think of something, it's more infrastructure, but Avenel you know part of Avenel was the original **Cloverleaf**. The (opened in 1929) The **Cloverleaf** as we knew then you know was the four leafed clover, that configuration, at Route 1 and 35 which used to be Route 25 and Route 4 before the renumbering system came into effect which I believe was in the '50s but I'm not sure. That always brought some significance to Avenel. I think we were the first cloverleaf in the nation and part of that was Avenel and part was Woodbridge. Construction, I remember when a couple of big companies started moving into Avenel which really.....You know Avenel has a very large industrial area and again depending on where in Avenel you live, where in Avenel you may travel to and from. You may not realize how large of our industrial area that really we do have in Woodbridge but much is in Avenel. You have that **Supermarket's General** complex, you know **Premier Dye Casting** was a big company that moved into Woodbridge, you had **Reynold's Metals** another big employer in Woodbridge, **Bradco**, you know it's a large distributor of building products as was **Bildisco** very big in Avenel; big employers. **Kulman Dining Car**, they came into Avenel in the mid-'60s and used to make the dining car restaurants. Well the dining cars plus the dining car restaurants.

Brenda Velasco: Was **General Dynamics** still functioning when you were growing up?

John M. Mitch: Absolutely. **General Dynamics** was still functioning and still employed many Avenel residents.

Brenda Velasco: So you lived in the residential area and then on the other side of Route 1 was the industrial area so it really had a self contained community.

John M. Mitch: Absolutely, and that's why I think the other side of Avenel was developed first also because **General Dynamics** had been there a long time and the development was built probably in part for their employees.

Brenda Velasco: And this is how it functioned whether it was Bayway (Esso) or Elizabeth Port (Singers). Your workers lived where the factory was. You did not have those cars and that method of transportation.

John M. Mitch: **M&T Chemicals** was another large employer on Rahway Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And so much have moved out.

John M. Mitch: Yes. I know you have sports events but the only two things, and I don't know if it comes into this category, but you know Eric LeGrand really put Avenel on the map when it comes to the topic of sports.

Brenda Velasco: Yes.

John M. Mitch: You know being the football player from Rutgers, today being a writer and a spokesperson. So of course I believe everybody in the sports world today and beyond knows who Eric LeGrand is and many people now realize that Avenel is in Woodbridge. And the other thing is, we had her in our parade if it's significant in mentioning, we had that Dagmara Wozniak. She was in the most recent London Olympics representing us. (2012 Summer Olympics). She was on the fencing team and although she did not you know take any medals home I mean she represented.....

Brenda Velasco: This time but she had.....

John M. Mitch: Right, this time in London but she did when she.....

Brenda Velasco: But she did previously.

John M. Mitch: Yeah, this time she was a permanent member of the team. In the past she was an alternate member but she brought some recognition to Avenel as well which I thought was really good.

Brenda Velasco: And we have our Municipal Clerk coming from Avenel which gets us to Question #10. (John Mitch also is the State President of the Municipal Clerks of New Jersey)

10. What do you like about Avenel today?

Brenda Velasco: You still live in Avenel.

John M. Mitch: I do.

Brenda Velasco: And your wife, Laura, though comes from Iselin so you're both Woodbridge residents but you remained in Avenel.

John M. Mitch: Right.

Brenda Velasco: And what do you like about it today?

John M. Mitch: You know as diverse as our population has become you know I went from growing up in a prominently white Catholic community to a community today where Caucasian is less than fifty percent and African American is twenty plus percent. You're not just anymore Catholic or Protestant. You know the religions have changed but even with the influx of hundreds of apartments Avenel still has that hometown feeling. I can still, and this is just me, walk the street, take a walk at night, I can still jog through the community, I still know the business owners and I'm still a big believer in what today is called buy local but I always refer to mom and pop, I'm a big believer in mom and pop shops

Brenda Velasco: And we're seeing a resurgence in that as well.

John M. Mitch: We are. We just picked up some nice ones in Colonia too but we are and that's you know.....I understand we have our malls and that's good, too, but

you know for a local service we have. You know the community is still there. I mean the community still pulls together and I can say that from experience and you witnessed most of my experiences with putting together community events, you know being on the committee of Avenel Community Day, being a chartered fire company of Avenel and putting together this 100th Anniversary in June (2013) where you saw thousands of people come together many from Avenel. We just you know kind of stick together like probably many other communities as well.

Brenda Velasco: I think the fire department still holds you together.

John M. Mitch: It does and you know we have access to everything so location is everything. What you like today about Woodbridge- whether it's Avenel or Woodbridge Township -there is nothing that you cannot get here and that even means transportation. If you don't have means of transportation, transportation is offered, you can get around.

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

John M. Mitch: Yes, I still have my mother.

Brenda Velasco: On Woodruff.

John M. Mitch: Right. I have two sisters and a brother and their families that still live in Woodbridge Township.

Brenda Velasco: Do they live in Avenel?

John M. Mitch: I have a sister and brother in Avenel, a sister in Colonia and I also have a brother-in-law in Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: So you still have quite a bit of family.

John M. Mitch: Yes.

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

Brenda Velasco: We discussed the prison riot which I'm glad you did because that comes out in Ann Pichalski's interview too. (Interview 37)

John M. Mitch: She would know that well. She lived right almost across the street.

Brenda Velasco: We discussed the 100th Anniversary with the fire department which was a big, big event this summer and successful.

John M. Mitch: You know I'm going through everything that I wrote down, again sight unseen your questions, because we covered it all, again ironically. But I wanted to mention the only two notes I have here is that when we talked about shopping and how I talked about you know we didn't have department stores and the places that finally came to us around 1960 and before the mall was built where they were not in Avenel: **S. Kleins on the Square**. We had to go to either **S. Kleins on the Square** which was on Route 1.....

Brenda Velasco: Route 1 and Gill Lane.

John M. Mitch: And Gill Lane which was not the original location by the way. When they first wanted to come down here they wanted to build over on property across the highway which is owned by the **Cloverleaf Cemetery** but the residents objected to that so they ended up where they were at the time. Your choice was that or **Two Guys from Harrison** which was on West Pond Road in Hopelawn.

Brenda Velasco: How about the apartments were you in high school when they put in those apartments because you mentioned all the bike trails?

John M. Mitch: Yes, I was in probably I would say late junior high. Now **Woodbine Gardens** was one of the very few apartment buildings in Avenel and back in the early '60s, let me just say before 1970 and into the '70s, they were a true garden apartment. They were new and they were well maintained inside and outside. I had friends who lived there and they were well kept. You know even on the other side of the highway we never had Evergreen Forest View. You didn't have any of those apartment complexes like you do today.

Brenda Velasco: Yeah, and that's past your childhood.

John M. Mitch: Yeah.

Brenda Velasco: By the time you're in high school. Okay, is there anything else? If something comes up just email me the information.

John M. Mitch: Okay.

Brenda Velasco: But I thank you very much for having a quiet location to interview you and thank you very much for sharing your memories of a bygone Avenel.

John M. Mitch: You're welcome.

Brenda Velasco: But I see a resurgence there right now.

John M. Mitch: Yeah, there is.

Brenda Velasco: And I'm happy to see that. Okay, thank you.

John M. Mitch: Oh you're more than welcome.