

Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interview
John and Ann Erdek
WPL10

(digital audio)

On September 27, 1978, John and Ann Erdek were interviewed for the Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interviews. There were two interviewers, a female and a male.

Female Interviewer: Okay, who was Charles White.

John Erdek: Well he was a Polish fellow. He changed his name. His name Whitepolovich or something like that. We call him Indian Charlie.

Female Interviewer: Why Indian Charlie?

John Erdek: Because he looked like an Indian to us. He rode a motorcycle or something.

Ann Erdek: He built it out of a five gallon paint can.

John Erdek: And he put glass in the front and riveted it.

Ann Erdek: And inner tubes. He made the top and canvass for the pants.

John Erdek: That's Indian Charlie. This guy here, that some guy from Sherman Street.

Ann Erdek: They're brothers.

John Erdek: Well him I used to call Stowee and this is Red Schlawter back.

Ann Erdek: Well they're brothers John.

John Erdek: I know but we called them Stowee. I think his name was Steve.

Female Interviewer: What were they doing? Why did they construct this?

John Erdek: This was a garden hose, the air hose.

Ann Erdek: Sunken Rum Riders.

John Erdek: He salvaged the parts, the propeller, the shaft and then what they used to call the skag to protect the propeller. It was all bronze. Mainly just for the scrap metal.

Ann Erdek: What did they do, sell it?

John Erdek: A lot of it we melted. Remember we had a little boundary in the garage? We melted it and made propellers out of it for our own boats. Had to do everything by hand and we had no money. You couldn't buy anything.

Female Interviewer: Where would they go diving?

John Erdek: Down in the bay wherever a rum boat was sunk.

Female Interviewer: How would you know about that?

John Erdek: You noticed it on the low tide and he had a motorboat. It was given to him by a neighbor, Martin Hansen. He had a moustache and was a little Dane.

Ann Erdek: She wouldn't know him.

John Erdek: He was an old eel man that had a string of eel pots in the river like across from the Copper Works.

Ann Erdek: And he gave the boat to my brother when my brother was fourteen years old.

John Erdek: The Oscar that was the name of the boat.

Ann Erdek: Yea, The Oscar.

John Erdek: It had a one cylinder palmer in it, six horse. It took a man to crank it too.

Ann Erdek: Howard was only seventeen at the time.

John Erdek: You had to crank it left it only turned left hand and an auto engine turns right.

Ann Erdek: And these foreign devices.....

John Erdek: I couldn't crank it.

Ann Erdek: Yea, well, I guess my brother more or less because he was very good at doing things.

John Erdek: He could do anything.

Ann Erdek: But he had no money to do anything with.

John Erdek: He was the Jack of all Trades and Master of All, Howard was.

Female Interviewer: So rum running was a big business in the Perth Amboy waterfront area?

John Erdek: You better believe it. There was a lot of it going on there. When I worked in the dry docks there was a whole fleet of them tied up at one of the piers there.

Female Interviewer: What was tied up there?

John Erdek: Rum boats.

Female Interviewer: How did you know they were rum boats?

John Erdek: Because they were all new. They were Quaker built style. You know, lap straight like the Viking boats. They were made out of white cedar with oak ribbing. No structure on them just the engine in the center with a hatch and all open space. They were forty feet long. Built like a fishing skip in those days, Jersey fishing skips. They usually had World War I airplane engines in them which were light and powerful. Sometime they would have two or three engines in it with three propellers for speed. Yea, that was a fleet of them tied up there.

Female Interviewer: Was everyone aware of what was going on?

John Erdek: Sure, the Coast Guard boat was tied up on the opposite side of the same pier but they couldn't do anything because these boats were registered legally and all. They were fishing craft or pleasure boats or whatever and they couldn't do a thing.

Female Interviewer: Were most of these boats owned by one person or were there a number of people who owned them?

John Erdek: More than likely Dutch Schultz from Elizabeth because he controlled that whole area.

Female Interviewer: Dutch Schultz?

John Erdek: Yea, Dutch Schultz.

Female Interviewer: Well we had talked with this one woman from Sewaren and she told us that every week Al Capone would come into Sewaren and when he came in she got her dollar for helping out in doing what she did.

John Erdek: That could be, sure.

Female Interviewer: Well would local people get involved in rum running?

Ann Erdek: Just the unloading and loading I suppose.

John Erdek: Only in unloading.

Ann Erdek: Unloading.

Female Interviewer: How would you find out about this?

John Erdek: They would generally come, like if they were going to unload up the river like remember where the brickworks used to be?

Ann Erdek: On the other side of the bridge.

John Erdek: Where the Victory Bridge is.

Female Interviewer: Okay.

John Erdek: Well, like between there and Keasbey there was a series of hollow tile companies that baked hollow tiles. They weren't brick, they were hollow tiles. They used a lot of that in building in those days. A lot went to New York by barge. There were docks that were easy to land, you know, and unload quick and you could also back a truck right there. There was a tea dock like along side of the Victory Bridge that belonged to the McConnell's lumberyard. They could use that and they could use another one by Hollow Tile Works and then there was another one in Keasbey. In fact, I think there was three different companies that manufactured hollow tile. They got all the clay, of course, from Woodbridge and Keasbey. That's where all the highways are now.

Female Interviewer: Well what was in Keasbey? This is during the twenties you're talking about.

John Erdek: Yea, the late twenties.

Female Interviewer: What was in Keasbey then?

John Erdek: Just a few homes along side what is now the Garden State Parkway bridge. There's a little side street there. Do you know where Monty's, the butcher, is?

Female Interviewer: Yes, right.

John Erdek: Well there's a little street there and there were some company homes there. I guess the brickworks must have owned them because they were all alike, most of them, and Hungarians and Polish people and Slovaks lived there. They all worked in the Hollow Tile Works. In fact, my father worked in one.

Female Interviewer: Where did you live?

John Erdek: I lived on Gifford Street most of my life but I was born on Kirkland Place. Do you know about where the dairy is on the top?

Female Interviewer: Yes.

John Erdek: There was a big red brick house.....

Female Interviewer: Is it still there?

John Erdek: No, that's gone a long time.

Ann Erdek: No, they tore it down after he was born. They said that's enough of that.

John Erdek: It dated back to the Revolutionary War when the British occupied Amboy. It had a cupola on top. You could see the bay from it like an observation booth. They say that the bricks were all brought here from England at the time when that house was built. A Dane named Jensen

owned it when my folks lived there.

Female Interviewer: There wasn't too much in that area at that time.

John Erdek: No, in fact Fayette Street ended at Gifford Street. There was no Fayette Street extending beyond Gifford Street to what is now Convery Boulevard. That was all fields where that large building is now for the senior citizens. We had a ball field there when we were kids and also we used to have big bonfires there during every election, the day of the general election November 2nd. We always gathered wood before about a week ahead of time. Everything up to moon houses we'd steal them and dragged them over there or steal a horse wagon, don't forget they had horses, and we'd pile everything on. When Cohen's clothing store was being built on the corner of Smith and Watson we stole a lot of the uprights, you know, loaded barrels on them, knocked the bottoms out of them, and stacked them up and put them upright. Then we'd pile all the wood around them. Milk wagons and everything we'd steal.

Female Interviewer: Now this was the night before Election Day?

John Erdek: About a week before.

Female Interviewer: You'd start collecting?

John Erdek: Start collecting.

Ann Erdek: Well we had one down our way too.

John Erdek: We had an enormous pile, I'd tell you, and it made a lot of fire.

Ann Erdek: All over, different groups in Amboy would do that.

John Erdek: I think half the town would come there to watch the fire.

Ann Erdek: And we had a barrel works out behind our yard and we would get a lot of barrels from there.

John Erdek: That was one of the big things.

Male Interviewer: Where would you have the fire?

John Erdek: Every year in the same spot you know. You know where Goodwin and Fayette Street is?

Male Interviewer: Yes.

John Erdek: Just about there, right in the center of the intersection.

Male Interviewer: Really!

Ann Erdek: We always had ours on Sherman Street by there.

Female Interviewer: So each neighborhood had their own bonfire?

Ann Erdek: Yes.

John Erdek: Yea, but we always had the largest. Dublin always had the largest.

Ann Erdek: Come on.

John Erdek: Our section was known as Dublin.

Ann Erdek: Well we were Dublin too.

John Erdek: You were Greasers down by the river there.

Female Interviewer: Wasn't anyone ever arrested for stealing all this?

Ann Erdek: No, everybody joined in.

John Erdek: It was like a community affair.

Ann Erdek: It was a celebration.

John Erdek: Everyone participated.

Female Interviewer: And it was just a big bonfire?

John Erdek: Yea, when the fire would be dying down they'd yell you got to give it some more. They'd get a wagon and go up to the railroad tracks and we used to steal the Lehigh Valley moon house office. Every year they had to build a new one. In those days everybody had moon houses.

Ann Erdek: That was a big night and during the night you'd hear the kids come selling newspaper yelling extra, extra, read all about it.

Female Interviewer: You'd read about the bonfire?

Ann Erdek: No, you'd read about the election.

Female Interviewer: Oh, yea, that followed.

Ann Erdek: I guess you sold papers too, didn't you?

John Erdek: Oh, yea, the Evening News was on State Street right across the street from where the Lincoln Firehouse is. There used to be the Ditmus Theatre there and the Evening News was right alongside of it. That's where I used to buy my papers. I paid two cents and sell them for three. I'd a penny a paper. All along Smith Street you'd hear Amboy News.

Ann Erdek: That was exciting because you didn't have any way to know who won. The extra papers used to sell for five cents.

John Erdek: Five cents, yea. They'd wake up in the morning, four-thirty or five o'clock and they'd yell extra, extra, and everybody would come running out with their nickels. Election news and whatever. No TV and no radio in those days.

Female Interviewer: What would you do? What was a typical day when you were growing up?

John Erdek: Mostly on the river or down the Water Works fishing.

Female Interviewer: Was it your usually crabbing group of people?

John Erdek: Yea, the neighborhood boys. We used to roller skate when they paved the school yard by No. 4 School.

Female Interviewer: And you spent quite a few summers up here in Millstone. They used to walk up.

John Erdek: I'd walk her to my uncle's farm. That's how we got to know this place.

Female Interviewer: You'd walk up here?

John Erdek: From Perth Amboy.

Female Interviewer: You'd walk to Millstone from Perth Amboy?

John Erdek: Not Millstone, all the way up to Hillsborough near Belle Meade.

Female Interviewer: How long did that take you?

John Erdek: Five or six hours.

Female Interviewer: That's a long walk.

John Erdek: You better believe it, about twenty-six miles. We were young kids around twelve years old. We'd walk the railroad tracks up to Metuchen then we'd get on the old Lincoln Highway, which is Route #27, and then all the way into New Brunswick, then down Hamilton Street to Millstone.

Female Interviewer: And who lived in Millstone at that time?

John Erdek: My uncle John Erdek.

Ann Erdek: You know Cousin Joe?

Female Interviewer: Yes.

Ann Erdek: His parents.

John Erdek: His father. They moved there in 1921 and Joe and I sat on the tailgate of the moving truck. Barefoot with a little dog all the way from Amboy. It was an old four cylinder white truck chugging along maybe twenty-five or thirty miles an hour. We thought it was great. When we started to come up here you started seeing those shale banks and say wow look at the cliffs. Then you'd see an apple tree along the road with apples lying in the ditch. We'd say geez look at all them apples. People must be crazy, they're letting all the apples lay here. You know we lived in the city and didn't have stuff like that.

Ann Erdek: We spent all our time at the river.

John Erdek: We could barely walk when we learned how to swim.

Female Interviewer: Was the water clean?

John Erdek: Yea, the only thing in the river was rare sewage. They had an outlet right under the county bridge. You know where the Cheese Boroughs Pond Company is well the sewer pipe ran right down there under the bridge and it came up and used to bellow out into the river there.

Ann Erdek: We all swam in it; we were healthy.

Female Interviewer: Did you do any fishing down there?

John Erdek: Sure, a lot of fishing. Eels and bluefish, all kinds of fish.

Ann Erdek: My father even for eels in the winter with a spear. He'd spear eels and then he would smoke them. We'd eat them fried, smoked and pickled.

John Erdek: You generally spear them along the channel bank in maybe thirty feet of water.

Ann Erdek: In the winter.

John Erdek: You had a long pole and the spear was like that, you know, and then it had like a little rounded edges with the hook pointing up. When you pushed it down in the mud they spread and when you pulled it up you hooked the eel. I guess they were all in bunches like when the hibernated into the mud. You always would pull up two or three at a time.

Female Interviewer: Did you ever do any crabbing?

Ann Erdek: Oh, all the time. He'd fill the bottom of the boat, you know, and the bottom would be almost covered.

John Erdek: We didn't hardly bother the crabs. Only when they wanted bait we'd go looking for the shedder crabs. That's when they're changing their shell and they start to peel off and they would get like leathery and they'd be fine for bait because they wouldn't come off the hook and they were great for weak fish.

Female Interviewer: Lots of weak fishing.

John Erdek: We'd go out in the bay like off of Morgan. You'd catch a lot of weak fish there. Of course there was some weak fish up the river but not so many.

Ann Erdek: The man that gave my brother the boat used to go with eel pots

and he'd have one of these big long tubs and he'd almost fill that with eels. He'd sit a whole day skinning them.

Female Interviewer: You came across a postcard of what was that, a shark that was caught in the water off Perth Amboy? What's the year of that, 1906?

John Erdek: Yea, that's before our time.

Ann Erdek: I don't know if you want that picture. That was an extra one I found.

John Erdek: I wasn't even born yet. That's quite a shark.

Female Interviewer: And what about this picture?

John Erdek: I must have been around seventeen years old. That must have been in '27 or '28.

Female Interviewer: Okay and this was where?

John Erdek: Like just east of the Victory Bridge where the grass grows along there. That point, right off of that point. We saw porpoises there. When you'd row a boat around there they'd come up out of the water.

Male Interviewer: What year was that?

John Erdek: '27 or '28.

Male Interviewer: Incredible. That's amazing to think that they would.....

John Erdek: They were still barely clean then. Clams used to come in at certain times, sea clams, and literally cover that beach. They'd be maybe six inches deep and a half inch in diameter; clams by the millions. They'd come in at a certain tide.

Ann Erdek: Clams?

John Erdek: Clams, little tiny ones.

Ann Erdek: Oh, tiny ones.

John Erdek: I guess that's the way they seeded themselves. Some actually did take hold on the flat where we swam. The tide would go out and it would be exposed almost to channels. They were these soft shell clams what you call steamers now. They'd walk along the flat sometimes and squirt water up. They got maybe that big, you know, some of them. Then the factories started to move in and that was the end of them. It killed them all.

Female Interviewer: Do you remember anything about Boynton Beach?

John Erdek: Just vaguely. One time I went there.

Female Interviewer: To do swimming or go to the amusement area?

John Erdek: Well I was at my uncle's home at the time and we took a walk down.

Female Interviewer: Where did you uncle live?

John Erdek: To tell you the truth I don't even remember the street.

Female Interviewer: Was his name Rudek?

John Erdek: No, his name was Remco, John Remco. He was a boiler engineer in Vulcan Detinning Works in Sewaren.

Female Interviewer: How long had he lived in Sewaren?

John Erdek: He didn't live there too long, just for a while. He was a good time Charlie.

Ann Erdek: Did you run across any Wards in Sewaren?

Female Interviewer: No.

Ann Erdek: I was just wondering.

Female Interviewer: Is that a relative?

Ann Erdek: Well sort of, not really. Well the Wards that did live in Sewaren their father was married to my father's sister but then she died and then he remarried. So he would have been with the second wife.

Female Interviewer: No, I haven't come across any. This is Sewaren and Boynton Beach. A lot of this would be before your time.

John Erdek: Yea.

Ann Erdek: A lot of these were Perth Amboy.

Female Interviewer: Had you ever gone to any dances in Sewaren?

Ann Erdek: I don't think he was a dancer.

John Erdek: I know my sister did, Lizzie. She was older than I.

Ann Erdek: My father's last cigarette was in the box so I saved it. That's what he always smoked. He rolled his own cigarettes. It still smells.

John Erdek: The Volstead Act.

Female Interviewer: That was 19.....

John Erdek: 1919 was it.

Female Interviewer: Which one?

John Erdek: The Volstead Act for that.

Female Interviewer: I thought that was 1913.

Male Interviewer: No, that was the other one.

John Erdek: 1919 I believe, wasn't it, the Volstead Act?

Female Interviewer: What Act was that?

John Erdek: Well that was prohibition.

Male Interviewer: Now was that for all of the states?

John Erdek: National.

Male Interviewer: Was New York dry before New Jersey or was it around the same time?

John Erdek: Same time. The Volstead Act was national, Congress enacted that. That was the whole nation.

Female Interviewer: Okay, prohibition was from 1920 to 1933?

John Erdek: Well that was it. The Volstead Act was prohibition.

Female Interviewer: And what exactly did that mean?

John Erdek: We were prohibited from selling alcoholic beverages.

Female Interviewer: Let's suppose you were a tavern owner.

John Erdek: You could sell what they call near beer which was 2.93 alcohol.

Male Interviewer: It put quite a few tavern owners out of business?

John Erdek: No, it didn't put any of them out of business. You'd go to the backdoor.....None of the local law enforcement agencies enforced it. It was only the FEDs, federal agents.

Female Interviewer: Had any of the federal agents come into the area?

John Erdek: Well, it was just like playing games.

Female Interviewer: Did you have an experience, well you weren't involved, but known about?

John Erdek: I waited one time for a boat to come in but that night it didn't

show so I lucked out. I would have gotten twenty dollars and a bottle of whiskey. That's what only what they paid.

Female Interviewer: That was a lot of money.

John Erdek: More than a week's pay. At that time I was making about nine dollars a week. The boats would come in and they would be loaded with this broken down cases. They'd empty the cases on the boats offshore and pack them in straw and burlap. The cases normal came twelve quarts to a case. At those days there was no such thing as fifths. It was all pints and quarts. Most of the time they'd run quarts and they would break the wooden cases down to six quarts packed in strong burlap. That way there they'd throw them and catch them as fast loading. From one deck to a high deck boat they'd just throw them down. The run boats were low and the boats they anchored twelve miles off shore, twelve mile limit, and a lot of them were old schooners and steamers. They were all from Canada in this area; all Canadian. Wherever the head man was would generally go out there in a speedboat. They had one dried up in the dry docks when I worked there. It was a nice varnished speedboat. Whenever that would go out in the morning, you know on a foggy morning, we'd know that he was going out there to make a contact, make a deal. He'd come back and the other boats would go out.

Female Interviewer: So everyone knew what was going on.

John Erdek: Yea, then the Coast Guard would follow them but he could never catch all of them.

Ann Erdek: Too fast.

John Erdek: Oh, they were fast. Well the Coast Guard boat was fast too but they had a one pound gun mounted on the foredeck, what we called the one pounder. It was a single shot, 37 mm, which was roughly that diameter. The shell was about that long with the projector. We called them one pounders. Then they used a thirty caliber machine gun in those days. A lot of time, you know, on a quiet summer night you could hear them shooting out there in the bay. Then you'd know that one was getting chased. They had slow machine guns. In fact I believe one time I read in the old papers that they were complaining that they were shooting too close to Perth Amboy and they were afraid that some of the bullets would ricochet into the homes along the south shore there. Of course, there weren't too many homes along the shore. Like along the block there was but now like from High Street to the train bridge. There were no homes along the shore there. It was rocky with old rotted boats with holes. There was no Sadowski Parkway and no streets. The last street that ran east and west was Lewis Street.

Female Interviewer: That was the end?

John Erdek: That was the end and the other streets just ended to a dead end, you know, with just dirt and weeds. Then there was a gas works there. They manufactured gas out of bituminous coal and gas cook. In those days they called that illuminating gas. That was fatal if you'd breathe that. It would kill you.

Female Interviewer: Where was this?

John Erdek: In Amboy between Kearney Avenue and.....around where Wisteria Street is in that area. There used to be a gas works there. I think there's a church near there now, a Greek church. When I was a boy I had to go there every day during vacation and pick two bags of coke. I had a little wagon which I pulled behind me. Of course going down was easy because when you'd get to the top of High School or Kearney Avenue and you just got in the wagon and coasted all the way down. Coming back had to haul those two bags of cokes every day and by the end of the summer the coal bin was full of coke. They had a big ash pile and we'd get in that and scratch with stake, you know, and pick out the pieces of the coke up from the ash to gunny sacks like potato bags.

Female Interviewer: They're heavy.

John Erdek: No coke is light.

Male Interviewer: Coke is real light.

John Erdek: It burns good.

Male Interviewer: Doesn't it smell a lot?

John Erdek: No.

Male Interviewer: Really?

John Erdek: No.

Male Interviewer: Less than coal maybe?

John Erdek: Less than coal, yea, because most of the gas was burned out of it.

Male Interviewer: My grandmother told me she used to get down and she called it picking cokes along the railroad tracks. She used to go down there every morning with her sister and they had to fill up burlaps bags and bring it back.

John Erdek: Where was this?

Male Interviewer: Down at sand hills in Keasbey, down that area.

Female Interviewer: When had the dance halls been taken down in Keasbey?

Male Interviewer: We don't know.

Ann Erdek: In Keasbey?

Female Interviewer: That had been three or four dance halls in Keasbey.

Ann Erdek: Really.

John Erdek: This is before our time but they called it Eaglewood.

Ann Erdek: There's a card in here that say Eaglewood.

John Erdek: You know in the old days excursion boats used to come from New York to Keasbey. That was like a resort on the river.

Ann Erdek: Keasbey had been a resort.

John Erdek: That's right, in fact one of those resort areas was known as Florida Grove. That's how the road got its name, Florida Grove Road. Her father remembers it because he was born in Perth Amboy.

Ann Erdek: Yea, he was born as Charles Street.

John Erdek: What year was he born?

Ann Erdek: 1889.

Female Interviewer: What was Salt Water Day?

John Erdek: We never had no Salt Water Day.

Ann Erdek: Yea, my mother always talked about Salt Water Day.

John Erdek: It must have been before my time because I was born in 1910.

Ann Erdek: No, they used to go to Boynton Beach for that.

Female Interviewer: They had a bowling alley, skee ball alley, a Ferris wheel and a picnic grove there.

Male Interviewer: And a shooting gallery.

Ann Erdek: It must have been quite a place.

Female Interviewer: Swings and concession stands.

John Erdek: These are all Model Ts. Ah, we got some pictures of her. We put a hat on here, a scarf around her neck and put booties in front of her hooves and took a picture. It looked like the horse was dressed up.

Ann Erdek: Now like when Dolly died, she was like a member of the family and Uncle Charlie was pretty upset. He went to bury Dolly. Do you remember that? And the floods came.

John Erdek: And Dolly came up and she started to smell. Oh did she smell.

Male Interviewer: Who got the job of burying the horse one day? Somebody real young was burying a horse.

Ann Erdek: Was that up on his uncle's farm?

John Erdek: Oh, yea.

Female Interviewer: What did you do?

John Erdek: There was an old horse we had to bury. It was too hard digging and we dug a hole deep enough for the body and dumped the horse in it and then covered it with dirt. Whatever was sticking up we sawed it off. It was the easiest way.

Ann Erdek: Those letters though when they wrote to each other as kids they were so comical.

John Erdek: I'll never forget that. That strikes me as funny today but at that time we couldn't dig because it was so frozen. It was like concrete. Out of necessity we had to do it.

Female Interviewer: Charlie mentioned that.

Ann Erdek: A lot of funny things went on.