

Oral History Interview
Julia Lepinsky Spagnoli
WH108

(Written transcript and digital audio)

On October 12, 2012, Julia Lepinsky Spagnoli was interviewed by Brenda Velasco in her home at 55 Dewey Avenue, Colonia at 1:30 P.M.

Brenda Velasco: Julia is a long time resident of Dewey Avenue in Colonia. She has also been my neighbor for many, many years; she was one of the first people on the block that I have interviewed. We're going to start the interview and I'm going to be calling you Julie. Every once in a while I'll slip in Honey if I forget Julie because that was her nickname growing up.

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

Julia Spagnoli: My name used to be "Honey" Julia Josephine Caroline Lepinsky but now I just call myself Julia Spagnoli.

Brenda Velasco: That's quite a monogram.

Julia Spagnoli: I know it is.

Brenda Velasco: And where do you live?

Julia Spagnoli: 55 Dewey Avenue in Colonia, New Jersey.

Brenda Velasco: And in what year were you born?

Julia Spagnoli: Oh, that's kind of something you don't ask a lady of my age but 1940.

Brenda Velasco: You look great and your mind is still functioning, yes.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Julia Spagnoli: 61 years.

Brenda Velasco: Which implies that you and your family moved to Woodbridge and that gets us into Question #3. (The family moved to Woodbridge about 1951)

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

Julia Spagnoli: Well my father's, the place he worked, was in Harrison which was **Hyatt Bearings Corporation** which is part of **General Motors** and they moved to Clark. The commute seemed to be too long. We didn't have the Parkway and all that kind of stuff in those years so we came here.

Brenda Velasco: Why did your dad pick the Colonia section of Woodbridge?

Julia Spagnoli: Well it's funny but he looked all around this area. He liked the Henry Inman Estate section.

Brenda Velasco: Oh and where is the Henry Inman Estate section?

Julia Spagnoli: Well, Amherst Avenue, Beekman Avenue, Clover Avenue, Dewey Avenue and Edgewood Avenue comprised the Henry Inman Estates in those days. Most of it was all empty land so he went up and down all the streets looking for what he considered.....he didn't want to be too close to the brook because he found out that sometimes Pumpkin Patch Creek overflowed and he looked at all these things. When he finally settled on Dewey Avenue, he picked the very center of the street

because it was the highest, away from the brook. You know we had the one down on your end of the street and this one and that's why he picked this piece of property. (There is a feeder into the Pumpkin Patch Creek next to 20 Dewey Avenue)

Brenda Velasco: He was a smart man because as we know Pumpkin Patch flooded and the library had to be emptied and put.....

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah, but even before then, I mean, you couldn't go down Jordan Road when it rained....it was really bad.

Brenda Velasco: He was a smart man. Okay, now you moved from Harrison, New Jersey what did.....

Julia Spagnoli: Well, actually I came from Kearny.

Brenda Velasco: Oh Kearny, okay. Now when you came how did you like living in Colonia because you were just.....

Julia Spagnoli: Eleven.

Brenda Velasco: Eleven years old you come to where there is a lot of empty land and you left Kearny with everything that was going on. What did you see? And this gets us to the physical changes; but you were on the cusp of being a teenager and you're stuck here.

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

Julia Spagnoli: Well, I had a very active life in Kearny. I went to dancing school, I was involved in the library and I did all sorts of things...I thought my life was great. Then I moved to Colonia and there was nothing but isolation and mud and bumpy roads. There were no stores, no people and no friends. It was grim.

Brenda Velasco: You were one unhappy eleven years old.

Julia Spagnoli: I was and there were also endless school bus rides. There were no schools. I went to a school in Woodbridge from first to sixth grade.

Brenda Velasco: What school is that?

Julia Spagnoli: I can't remember the number but it's the one that the back faces St. Georges Avenue. (Amboy Avenue)

Brenda Velasco: That's probably School 11, Ross Street School.

Julia Spagnoli: It used to take well over an hour to go to school and to come home from school because the bus went through the whole township.

Brenda Velasco: To pickup.

Julia Spagnoli: And I only stayed there one year and then they sent me to Hopelawn School. (Clyde Avenue)

Brenda Velasco: Then you went to the Hopelawn School which has since closed.

Julia Spagnoli: But at least I stayed there two years.

Brenda Velasco: That was for seventh and eighth grade.

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah.

Brenda Velasco: Then where did you end up for high school?

Julia Spagnoli: The old Woodbridge High School.

Brenda Velasco: On Barron Avenue then.

Julia Spagnoli: And then when the new school was completed, I moved over there.

Brenda Velasco: Do you remember what grade that was?

Julia Spagnoli: I was probably a sophomore.

Brenda Velasco: Woodbridge High School then.

Julia Spagnoli: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Because this is all before we had Colonia High School and Colonia Middle School which you would have been attending at School 17. So you're saying none of these schools were around.

Julia Spagnoli: No schools, no churches. You had to take the church bus to St. Cecelia's in Iselin. It was quite funny. I remember my mother and me and my sister in those days you had to get dressed up for church in those days. You had to wear your hat and your high heeled shoes and to try to walk down Dewey Avenue it was awful. Walking down Dewey Avenue then, when you got down to Inman, it seemed like a very big hill. Mrs. Fagan's farm was up there.

Brenda Velasco: By School 21, right?

Julia Spagnoli: Yes, and she had her cane and she would walk down her dirt driveway. She was an old woman already at that point and she would walk down to get the church bus, too. But it used to look so nice up there. It was the farmhouse on the hill.

Brenda Velasco: Where exactly was the farmhouse located? Was it where School 21 is?

Julia Spagnoli: It seems like it was more toward Dewey than the school.

Brenda Velasco: And then that land was sold.

Julia Spagnoli: I guess I was about 16 when they started building all the houses. Of course our mailboxes were all on the other side of Inman Avenue, too. Because it used to be RFD; I don't remember the number but we used to get our mail down there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was on the other side of Inman Avenue in between the Cypresses or.....

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah. Well each street had their row of mailboxes down on Inman.

Brenda Velasco: You've really seen changes.

Julia Spagnoli: And if you wanted the post office you had to go to Rahway or Woodbridge.

Brenda Velasco: Did you have running water?

Julia Spagnoli: No, we had to have a septic tank and a well. Everybody did back then.

Brenda Velasco: And I recall that when I moved in '67 we also had well water. Some people still on our block have well water because it really tastes good. We don't look at the microbes but it does taste good.

Julia Spagnoli: Well, I'm surprised that people don't have their water tested. They just continue on and say well we've been alright so far.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's look at the services that the town gave you. Did you have garbage pickup?

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah, I guess we did have a garbage pickup. I don't remember much about it because I guess my father had to worry about that.

Brenda Velasco: Right, you were eleven years old; you could care less. How about the stores? Was there any store on Inman Avenue that you recall?

Julia Spagnoli: I think we had a gas station and a barber shop and **Benny's General Store**.

Brenda Velasco: Where was **Benny's General Store**?

Julia Spagnoli: Where the **Subway** shop is now.

Brenda Velasco: What did they sell?

Julia Spagnoli: He had a soda fountain in there; that was wonderful. You could go there to get the most wonderful egg creams. He had big barrels of pickles and he sold cold cuts and that kind of thing but that's it.

Brenda Velasco: Did we have any banks at that time because all I could think is how many we have now. We have at least five banks on Inman Avenue now.

Julia Spagnoli: Many years before the **First Bank of Colonia** came. (Currently Bank of America is at the corner of West and Inman, former site of First Bank of Colonia)

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so we mentioned the school situation. You had very little here in Colonia.

Julia Spagnoli: And it was culture shock too because I came from a Catholic school in Kearny to a Woodbridge school. People came very everywhere it seemed. Everybody was thrown there and it just seemed so alien to what I was used to. It was hard. I didn't have friends, you couldn't roller skate and you couldn't ride a bike. My father kept yelling at me to go walk around the block, that it would be good for me because all I did was read. That's how I spent my teenage years: reading. My mother couldn't drive so it wasn't.....

Brenda Velasco: You couldn't get out of here only to school.

Julia Spagnoli: My father was a third shift worker but what did he do five days a week? He and my mother rode the ambulance. We got the call here at the house. The red ambulance was parked here because they didn't have a first aid squad or anything just an ambulance. And my father drove and my mother was in back with whoever they were taking to the hospital. I remember the scary times when they were putting in the storm drains on Inman Avenue and we had a few cave-ins. I remember them getting a call. My mother with her bad heart was there helping dig them out so they could take them to the hospital. I mean it was really strange. I'll never forget that red ambulance parked in our driveway. I'd come home from school and there it would be. We had two other people on our street who also lived.....Billy York.....

Brenda Velasco: Right and he lived at the corner....100 Dewey.

Julia Spagnoli: Walter Pinkowicz, "Pinky" was his nickname, lived in your house. (20 Dewey Avenue) They all worked on the ambulance but my father because he worked nights it was.....

Brenda Velasco: I was going to ask you about the third shift. A lot of people today, 2012, don't know what a third shift is so a third shift is.....

Julia Spagnoli: Midnights and I remember my father moved here for convenience but when we would have big snowstorms the only way he could get to work was walk and he did. He would leave very, very early and get home very late in the morning but that's how he got to work because nobody came to plow your street.

Brenda Velasco: We had big snowstorms back then so he did a lot of walking in the winter. Okay, we'll go down to Question #5.

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

Brenda Velasco: For the post office you said you went to Rahway or to Woodbridge. How about the library?

Julia Spagnoli: Well, we had the little library over on Chain O' Hill but we didn't go there because they didn't have enough books. We had to take the car to go somewhere. We went to the Barron Avenue Library.

Brenda Velasco: On Rahway Avenue.

Julia Spagnoli: For the supermarkets we had to go to Rahway.

Brenda Velasco: How about the firehouse?

Julia Spagnoli: We always had a firehouse, I think, but I can't be sure. I guess I didn't pay attention enough to those kinds of important things. I was too busy I guess wishing I had a friend.

Brenda Velasco: How about parks? Did we have parks in Colonia at this time?

Julia Spagnoli: No, I don't think so. We used to go to Roosevelt Park that's if my father was willing to take us somewhere which he normally wasn't.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Julia Spagnoli: I read books.

Brenda Velasco: A well read individual

Julia Spagnoli: And I listened to opera so that's why opera has remained my passion all through my life because that's all I did. I memorized operas in those days.

Brenda Velasco: Who turned you on to opera because that's not something normal that a teenage.....

Julia Spagnoli: My father did. He was a tenor and early on, he was Lithuanian and he was involved in a lot of the Lithuanian cultural things, he used to sing and act and do all these things.

Brenda Velasco: Kearny had a big Lithuanian population and Lithuanian church up there. What was the church?

Julia Spagnoli: Our Lady of Sorrows.

Brenda Velasco: Is that the church you attended then?

Julia Spagnoli: No, we didn't because we went to Catholic school and that was St. Cecilia's in Kearny; so that's where we went to church.

Brenda Velasco: But they had a big Lithuanian population in that area as well as Linden. You had Lithuanian Liberty Halls just scattered around. This was right after World War II and let's put in the (historical) context; the Soviets (Russians) had invaded and annexed Lithuania at the time so there was a strong tie to the Lithuanian culture. Was he born in Lithuania?

Julia Spagnoli: No, he was born in New York but his parents took the family back to Lithuania and he lived there for seven years.

Brenda Velasco: Was that during the war then?

Julia Spagnoli: No, it was way before the war.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so maybe the 1930s.....

Julia Spagnoli: Because they went back and it was the kind of thing that my grandmother came from like a high born family and my grandfather was a farmer so her family disowned them. So they bought their children back hoping that they would welcome them with open arms. They waited seven years and then they went back.

Brenda Velasco: Their loss, United States' gain.

7. What was the focal point of your community?

Julia Spagnoli: School and church. There really wasn't anything else.

Brenda Velasco: The church you attended was St. Cecelia's and what functions did they have that you attended?

Julia Spagnoli: Nothing really. I mean because they didn't even have a real church then, it was a Quonset hut.

Brenda Velasco: They built the church much later or else had it (masses) in the school; the school came first. How about family? What did you do on a Sunday when you had no school?

Julia Spagnoli: Generally speaking we just went to church and we'd go back to Kearny to visit the relatives, you know that kind of thing.

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

Julia Spagnoli: Once I could drive, and I went to a nice high school, then life changed. I mean when I was sixteen I got a part time job because high school was only a half a day.

Brenda Velasco: Right, you were on double session at the old Woodbridge High School.

Julia Spagnoli: So I got a job for an attorney in Iselin. Sometimes I'd walk home and sometimes somebody in the office would give me a ride home. That changed my life when I got a job.

Brenda Velasco: Was he on Oak Tree Road then?

Julia Spagnoli: Yes, it was Francis Foley. He was very, very nice.

Brenda Velasco: And how did you like Iselin because that is where you went to church and that's where you got the job? Did Iselin have more services than Colonia?

Julia Spagnoli: Well they had a movie theater.

Brenda Velasco: That's right.

Julia Spagnoli: Other than that, I don't think I much cared.

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

Julia Spagnoli: Just a lot of cave-ins when they were working on Inman Avenue. That's what I remember the most.

Brenda Velasco: Those were the accidents then and that's when your mom and dad had to.....

Julia Spagnoli: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Was Inman Avenue paved at the time?

Julia Spagnoli: Inman Avenue was paved. It was a very narrow street and my mother didn't ever want me to walk on Inman Avenue because she felt people just zoomed down the road. There were a lot of bad things that happened. I don't remember anything specific that she just wouldn't let us do. If we went to **Benny's**, we had to walk around the back way.

Brenda Velasco: You had to take the back way. You had to go down Hawthorne then.

Julia Spagnoli: Because there certainly were no sidewalks and the road was so narrow.

Brenda Velasco: Well, we still don't have sidewalks on Dewey Avenue or Hawthorne but I think it's by choice now. I think those people do not want the sidewalks. It makes it more suburban. How about construction?

Julia Spagnoli: Construction was everywhere. I mean the houses just were going up. It was incredible actually when you watched it. I mean this was like all of Dewey Avenue most of it. It looked like a wheat field. No trees, I guess dairy cows grazed there before we came so there were no trees, but the houses went up very quickly. There were a handful of houses here on Dewey Avenue. I don't know what the first house was it might have been the Taylor's house.

Brenda Velasco: Where was the Taylor's house located?

Julia Spagnoli: Do you know where Mr. Lech lives?

Brenda Velasco: Yes. (80 Dewey Avenue)

Julia Spagnoli: That house but that was the proverbial rose covered cottage type house with the white picket fence and the trellis with the roses. I mean on Dewey Avenue it almost seems strange to have a house like that with all the mud and ruts in the road.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of painting of that white picket fence then.

Julia Spagnoli: And full of flowers and Christmas....Mr. and Mrs. Sanford and their chicken farm.

Brenda Velasco: And they lived next door to you almost, right?

Julia Spagnoli: Two houses down.

Brenda Velasco: So you heard the chickens and the roosters in the morning when you woke up?

Julia Spagnoli: Yes, we did.

Brenda Velasco: Quite a contrast from Kearny.

Julia Spagnoli: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Did anybody have a horse around here?

Julia Spagnoli: The pony track up there you mean.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, where was the pony track? Do you remember that?

Julia Spagnoli: On the corner of Inman and Wood.

Brenda Velasco: They used to give pony rides. This was still true in the 1960s. So you moved here in the '40s, late '40s after World War II or '50s, but they had.....

Julia Spagnoli: They didn't give pony rides when we moved here but later they started because they had horses and I think Mrs. Fagan had a horse or two on her farm.

Brenda Velasco: Then, I guess, shortly after you come all of Cypress Avenue development was built up.

Julia Spagnoli: It took at least five years before that started.

Brenda Velasco: Five years for the Cypress development, okay.

Julia Spagnoli: I think Shore Crest was first. I remember when they built that and we went to look at the model homes. All I wanted was my mother and father to move there.

Brenda Velasco: They had sidewalks. And where is Shore Crest?
Julia Spagnoli: That's the development over by the Parkway off Amherst.
Brenda Velasco: And they had toilets and running water because the lines were going in there; whereas you only had well water and a septic tank.
Julia Spagnoli: There is one other thing I did for a couple of summers that I hated because it's really funny but because of all the construction and the rocks. I mean there were rocks you wouldn't believe, and that was my job during the summer. I had to pick rocks and throw them into where the driveway was going to be. I remember crying as I was picking rocks. The dirt would turn to mud and I would think this is an awful life. That's terrible when I think back.
Brenda Velasco: Quite a different experience.
Julia Spagnoli: And yet I wasn't so unhappy because I did have my reading and my opera which has sustained me through my whole life.
Brenda Velasco: It's your special love.
Julia Spagnoli: But when you're twelve, it's just you think differently.
Brenda Velasco: It's true of everybody going through adolescence.

10. What do you like about Colonia today?

Julia Spagnoli: Practically everything. I think Woodbridge has come into its own with our mayor. I really like him. When I see all the solar panels...you know I look at everything and I see how we're going green. What a change! I mean we used to compost. I still compost in my backyard but we composted always because that's what you did those days because you couldn't have that much garbage I guess. I don't know what the garbage terms were then but I really like everything. I mean I think Woodbridge is such a wonderful place for people to live now.
Brenda Velasco: So you're going to stay here forever.
Julia Spagnoli: I hope so.
Brenda Velasco: I do too; you're a good neighbor.

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

Julia Spagnoli: No, everybody moved. I'm the only one left.

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: Anything that you can think of about growing up here or when they got the new schools in the '50s. What year did you graduate from high school?
Julia Spagnoli: 1958.
Brenda Velasco: 1958, so you're a high school graduate then. You lived here, you never moved out of the house. You've had it renovated.
Julia Spagnoli: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: Where did your kids go to school then?
Julia Spagnoli: My children went to School 21 they started out there so they were able to take advantage of the good times in Colonia. Of course, you know, I used to always tell them, I guess all parents tell them, you don't know what it used to be like

in the good old days. Now I look back and think they were the good old days in some ways.

Brenda Velasco: And your children also benefited from Colonia Middle School and Colonia High School so they became more a part of Colonia whereas you had to attend the other schools and be bused all over to Hopelawn. Do you remember any incidents in any of the schools like who your teachers were or the principals were?

Julia Spagnoli: I guess the person I remember the most probably was when I went to Keasbey and we had Mr. (Ernest) Dubay. He was the gym teacher but he was so nice. You know how you just.....I don't know maybe I just liked him because the school seemed so rough coming from a Catholic school. Not that the nuns weren't rough. I had my knuckles wrapped by a nun with a pointer because she aimed for a boy and he ducked and I got hit. So that's pretty rough but now you find teachers who understand and you know he was one of those kind of people. He was nice.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else that we should mention then? You still compost; you still take care of the environment. You do a lot of walking.

Julia Spagnoli: I try. It's the only way to keep going.

Brenda Velasco: And the streets are safe around here, too. And you do have running water now, right?

Julia Spagnoli: All the comforts of home.

Brenda Velasco: Alright then, anything with the stores? Was there anything that happened with the stores coming in?

Julia Spagnoli: Well, I remember when the stores started coming in. You know we got the drug store. (Colonia Drug Store in Inman owned by Jerry Rosa, located near the Post Office)

Brenda Velasco: How old were you then?

Julia Spagnoli: I'm not sure. I was probably a teenager but that was wonderful because you could walk to the drug store if you had to. Then I remember I was probably sixteen or seventeen by the time we got a card shop. It was **York's Gift and Card Shop**. It probably was where the liquor store is or something now on Inman and that was wonderful, too. Little by little all those things that you took so for granted when you live in a town. Then when they start coming in it was like wow, you know.

Brenda Velasco: You were getting some of the amenities that you had lost in Kearny but then this area was building up at the same time with Shore Crest and the development on Cypress then Lynn Crest. With the people coming in this was when you got the amenities because as you said Mrs. Fagan's farm wasn't the only farm. There were lots of farms in this area so Colonia was totally transformed.

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah, well, down there by Clark Pace there was a huge chicken farm there too.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, right across from the Custode's home on the corner of Edgewood and Clark. You have really seen Colonia transformed. Do you recall what your dad paid for the property that the house is built on?

Julia Spagnoli: This was like two lots, it's a half of acre. I think he paid around nine hundred dollars for it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and this was in 19.....

Julia Spagnoli: '48 or '49, somewhere around there. It was a lot of money then though.

Brenda Velasco: It may have been then. I don't think you could buy anything for nine hundred dollars in Woodbridge or Colonia right now. Alright, well I thank you very much and this is another insight about Colonia, the transformation from farmland to suburbia. So thank you very much for the interview. I'm glad we were able to finally sit down and.....

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah, me too.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, thank you.

.....

Brenda Velasco: I'm still with Julia Spagnoli and while we did formally conclude the interview the brain is still working and we have some more information. Julia, tell me about some of the other things you did in this area.

Julia Spagnoli: Well, the summer fun was picking blackberries because the blackberry bushes were everywhere so you could pick blackberries from morning until night and we did a lot of times. My mother would make blackberry pies, everything blackberry, jelly, we did everything blackberry. It lasted us through the whole winter. It was wonderful because they were big and delicious but with little cultivation I guess they could have been great but everybody just eradicated all the blackberry vines and now you can't find them anymore.

Brenda Velasco: No, because when I moved in '67 we had blackberries. I was astounded and I guess with all our landscaping they were yanked and no more blackberries. Is there anything else that you could remember that you did during the summer?

Julia Spagnoli: No, that was probably about it, that was our big thing; and then Chris Bennedite was a little bit older and my mother had me helping her. My first pie was a blackberry pie.

Brenda Velasco: And it must have been delicious.

Julia Spagnoli: I thought it was. That was when I started my great interest in cooking with my first blackberry pie.

Brenda Velasco: How old were you?

Julia Spagnoli: I probably was maybe twelve or thirteen at that point.

Brenda Velasco: So you had some unusual experiences growing up in the Township of Woodbridge-Colonia section that most people didn't have in the late '40s and '50s.

Julia Spagnoli: Yeah, and it's just interesting you know when you look back. Even though they were tough times and I considered it pretty grim there was still a lot of happiness going on in your life. You know I'm happy that I lived here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, that's it then. Thank you very much.