

Oral History Interview
Margaret “Peggy” Catalano
WH069

(written transcript and digital audio)

On November 5, 2009, Margaret “Peggy” Catalano was interviewed at the Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 2:00 P.M.

Peggy is the Social Concerns Ministry Coordinator as well as a parish nurse as well as a parishioner of St. James Catholic Church which is celebrating its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary this year.

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

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Peggy Catalano: I’m Peggy Catalano and I live on Green Street in Woodbridge. I was born on June 4, 1932 in St. Peter’s Hospital but I was only there three or four days and came home to my home where I live now in Woodbridge and have been there for seventy-seven years.

Brenda Velasco: Seventy-seven years on Green Street.

Peggy Catalano: In the same house.

Brenda Velasco: The same house. Wow, that’s unusual. People don’t stay in the same house but that’s great.

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

Peggy Catalano: Well my grandparents lived in Perth Amboy and they were always trying to kind of move up and they went from Hall Avenue to Maple Street to High Street in Perth Amboy and then bought the home in Woodbridge; that was in 1917. My mother and I believe two of her brothers came to Woodbridge with them and several cousins and other members of the family who would stay periodically at the house. It belonged to the Edgar family originally so it’s actually been in two families over all these years. It was the second house of the Edgars. It was built for the senior Edgar’s daughter when she married a second cousin of hers; half of the house was built sometime in the earlier 1700s and then when she had her first baby her father added on to the house so there are two sections to it. Then the entrance to the Edgar estate, which this was on, was down at Green Street and Rahway Avenue where the railroad station is now. The main house was about a quarter of a mile up the road near where **Fortunoffs** was, until recently, and it was a huge, huge house. It was empty during World War II and shortly after that some people that were homeless got into it and I guess they were cold and built a fire and the house burnt down. So ours was all that was left on that part of the estate. Our section went from Green Street all the way back to North Park Drive.

Brenda Velasco: That was a large area.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, it was a very large area. Then my mother and father built, in 1924, the house next door and my brother was born in there and then on the other

side, just after World War II, my uncle, Joe Leahy, built the house on the other side so we had our own little Leahy complex.

Brenda Velasco: You had a compound. This is New Jersey.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, but unfortunately, during the Depression, they lost a lot of the property and what is now Martool Drive was bought by John Toolan and it was named Martool after his wife Marge and Toolan and then South Park Drive is where the brook is.

Brenda Velasco: John Toolan.

Peggy Catalano: He was an attorney and I believe, at one time, he might have been a State senator or assemblyman I'm not sure, in Woodbridge. He was very active in politics back in the thirties and forties.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, **Kiddie Keep Well Camp**?

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That's where I know the name, **Kiddie Keep Well Camp** in Edison, Roosevelt Park, named after him. Alright, so there's a lot of history.

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And your house is.....

Peggy Catalano: Yes, the house. During the Depression and after that even sometimes, my mom, since it was a big house, in order to keep everybody going, other members of her family as well kept boarders.

Brenda Velasco: And this was a big house.

Peggy Catalano: This was a big house so we sometimes had as many as twenty men in the house and most of them were from Pennsylvania. There were two groups there they were called the Dutchmen, who were Pennsylvania Dutch, and then there was an Irish group called Murphy's group. She used to make three meals a day for them and they would come and go. They worked for the Reading Railroad at that time.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and that was in Port Reading?

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: These were the people that were coming in.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, and they would come sometimes for a week or three weeks and we even got to know all their families. They would come and visit us at later dates. Then my mom had a lot of card parties in the house for St. James: Parent Teacher's Association and Rosary Society. It's still pretty much the same on the inside; the kitchen is a little more modern and so are the bathrooms. But it's a nice little house with high ceilings and there are fireplaces in every room which now don't work because during the Morgan explosion, I believe that was around 1917. Three of the chimneys were knocked off and my grandfather decided we had one with a furnace in the cellar so we didn't need any chimneys put back on. So now none of the fireplaces are working but it's a lovely old home.

Brenda Velasco: How many rooms?

Peggy Catalano: Fifteen.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! That is one huge house.

Peggy Catalano: Okay, so you've got quite a bit of history in the house that you grew up in.

4. What physical changes have occurred over the years in the area you lived?

-houses, streets, services, stores, houses of worship, schools etc.

Brenda Velasco: You mentioned Green Street has changed.

Peggy Catalano: Green Street has changed tremendously just with more houses. There are still some of the old houses there right in my area but of course when we get up Route #9 my mom and I were the first two people to go around the bend traffic circle on Route #9. On Route #1 and #9 was the old **Howard Johnsons** and I got to turn the light on. Mr. Sider and my mother and I got to turn the first light in the dormer window at **Howard Johnsons** when they opened up. (September 15, 1939)

Brenda Velasco: Wow!

Peggy Catalano: So that was a real thrill for me. I was quite young. It was a big thrill and I felt very bad when **Howard Johnsons** was torn down because it was then the **Landmark**.

Brenda Velasco: Right, it became the **Landmark Inn** and now it's just a.....

Peggy Catalano: Car lot I believe.

Brenda Velasco: Car lot, right **McGuire Cadillac**.

Peggy Catalano: Okay, so this is the location we're talking about.

Brenda Velasco: Then they took the Green Street circle away so that's gone and Route #1 and #9 generate a lot of traffic up there. Then where Woodbridge Center is, we used to go blackberry picking every summer with my mom up there.

Brenda Velasco: What did you do with the blackberries?

Peggy Catalano: My mother would make blackberry pie and jam and things like that.

Brenda Velasco: Lucky you.

Peggy Catalano: I had three cousins, the Peterson boys who were well known in Woodbridge. Bernie was on the Council for many years, Ray taught in school and Ace "Frank" worked in Town Hall. Then the Leahy family, it was Joe Leahy, was on the fire department for years and his grandsons and his son were all in the fire department.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we're talking about Woodbridge.

Peggy Catalano: They were all Woodbridge people and they're all out of Woodbridge now except for one of the young Leahy guys who is in his fifties, I guess.

Brenda Velasco: We'll get to him later than. Okay, so Green Street was paved then.

Peggy Catalano: Only in the middle. There were no sidewalks and the side you could walk all the way up to Iselin without probably seeing three cars. But it was only paved in the middle and it was gravel on the side.

Brenda Velasco: How about the services, did you have garbage pickup back then?

Peggy Catalano: We did. All my lifetime I remember we had garbage pickup.

Brenda Velasco: And you had running water?

Peggy Catalano: We had running water, yes we did, and we had all the modern conveniences. When they moved into the house there were still some of the gas lights left but they were not connected. The electricity had been put in, and then they were removed over the years so they are not even there anymore. I wish they were just to see what they were like. I never did see them.

Brenda Velasco: Too bad. Okay, how about the stores in the area?

Peggy Catalano: Well we had **Christensen's** and **Choper's** on Main Street in Woodbridge and **Jackson's Drug Store** and **Publix Drug Store** was a late comer. There was also **Shepard's Butcher Store** and Pete Vogel's liquor store. I think across the street from the liquor store Weiner's had a little liquor store which had just closed a few years ago.

Brenda Velasco: That's right, they were the last holdout.

Peggy Catalano: Then the **College Inn** is now the restaurant up further. That was owned by the VanTassels who were old Woodbridge people and that was sold to **Venezia's** and it's now the **Trattoria Venezia**. Then **Castello's** is where **Choper's Department Store** was.

Brenda Velasco: Now how did you get to Main Street from your house?

Peggy Catalano: My mother drove so we were driven. In fact, I went to St. James School and we were driven back and forth to school except when the weather was bad we walked back and forth most of the time.

Brenda Velasco: Everything was handy for you.

Peggy Catalano: Oh, yes. There was no Woodbridge Center then.

Brenda Velasco: Everything was within.....

Peggy Catalano: Oh, yes, everything was within walking distance and there was **Caeser's Ice Cream Store**.

Brenda Velasco: Where was that?

Peggy Catalano: Upper Main Street and then there was the, I'm trying to think of the name of the hotel (Middlesex Hotel) that was there for years and years and years, the big old wooden hotel with a porch around it on the corner of Amboy Avenue and Main Street. Oh, **Galitis**, and that dated way back. It was right across the street from the Knights of Columbus.

Brenda Velasco: That's where the karate place is now.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, that's right.

Brenda Velasco: You've got a good memory; you've got a very good memory. How about houses of worship?

Peggy Catalano: Of course we belonged to St. James. When my mother came to Woodbridge in 1917 with her parents, St. James was on upper Main Street and they moved the old church down to the corner of Grove and Amboy Avenue and then that was torn down in the '60s and the new church was put up, I believe, in '65. The school was built in 1932 and my uncle was one of the architects on it, Frank Leahy, and George Brooks was the head architect on it. That's been added on to since then. I spent my first eight years in school there.

Brenda Velasco: You had nuns then.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, we had the Sisters of Mercy. There were all nuns. There were no lay teachers at all at that time.

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

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall a post office?

Peggy Catalano: The post office was down on Main Street on the westbound side and the water company was where the Chamber of Commerce is now; the post office

was next to that. The old Town Hall was still there, of course and the monument is still there.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, some things stayed. It's been refurbished though thanks to the LaPenta's, Frank and Audrey and the Historical Association. So they have refurbished it and it looks pretty good.

Peggy Catalano: Woodbridge Park was really the main park in town at that time and that runs between North and South Park Drive all the way from School Street over and the old synagogue was there before the building that was the new synagogue, Adath Israel, which is now the Veterinary Hospital.

Brenda Velasco: So the old synagogue then was on School Street.

Peggy Catalano: Right and the library was where the Barron Arts Center is now. That was the main library.

Brenda Velasco: So that was a little walk for you.

Peggy Catalano: That was far away, yes. I'm sitting here looking at a picture of Dr. Fredericks over there and he was a wonderful, wonderful man and did a lot of good in Woodbridge. (Portrait hanging in meeting room) When I was in nurses training he was very kind to me and several other student nurses so we affiliated up in north Jersey somewhere for communicable disease. I think there were three of us and he used to send a car for us when we did get a day off which wasn't very often so we could get back to Woodbridge and Perth Amboy.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, do you want to explain the role that George Fredericks played in this township?

Peggy Catalano: He was a doctor here for many years and he did an awful lot of good for people. He was very, very generous and he did a lot of work with people who couldn't really afford to go to a doctor. It was before Medicare and Blue Cross and all that. He would just very quietly take care of people and do things for them and made sure they had enough to eat. He was quite a good man.

Brenda Velasco: Where did he have his office?

Peggy Catalano: It was on the corner of Columbus Avenue and Main Street. I think there's a pediatrician in there now.

Brenda Velasco: And George Frederick Plaza is named after him where our Health Center is, keeping alive his memory. Okay, how about the firehouse?

Peggy Catalano: I always remember the firehouse being there and the high school was on Barron Avenue at that time, it is now a middle school.

Brenda Velasco: Did you attend Woodbridge.....

Peggy Catalano: No, I went to St. James and St. Mary's in Perth Amboy.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so high school was at St. Mary's in Perth Amboy so you eventually you ended back in Perth Amboy, just for school.

Peggy Catalano: On a daily basis.

Brenda Velasco: On a daily basis, right. What year did you graduate from St. Mary's?

Peggy Catalano: 1950.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Peggy Catalano: Well, in the summertime we went berry picking, roller skating, bicycle riding and all the kids played on the street and there was a big Valentine

family down the street. I think there were nine children in that family and then the other ones that were around were my Peterson cousins. They lived for a long time until they were a little bit older, up on Gorham Avenue. It was all open fields between our house and their house. We went to the movies on Saturday night and Sunday afternoons when we got a little bit older. Then we went roller skating and a lot of us just played outside. We played hopscotch and all those games that I don't know if I know how to do it anymore. We even played marbles.

Brenda Velasco: All inexpensive ways to occupy your time.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, there was no TV. We listened to the radio in the evening, the *Lone Ranger, the Shadow, Jack Armstrong*; that was the big thing. I would say mom I can do my homework and listen at the same time.

Brenda Velasco: You were multi-tasking back then or trying to.

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: One question, do you recall what the movies cost, the admission?

Peggy Catalano: Yes, it was ten cents and Mr. Szabo was the manager and the owner and he put it up to twelve cents and all mothers were up in arms.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, then did he put it back down?

Peggy Catalano: No.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

Peggy Catalano: And they had vaudeville on Sunday afternoon.

Brenda Velasco: Oh, wow! So this was a popular place and where was the movie house?

Peggy Catalano: Do you know where **Quick Chek** is now?

Brenda Velasco: Yes, okay, by the Town Hall. So this was a very popular place.

Peggy Catalano: Yes and then there was jewelry store that Mr. Szabo owned next door.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so there were a lot of things to do around here.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, we were kept busy because Jim Keating, in later years, started a basketball team at St. James for the younger kids and they had cheerleaders and the whole bit and the basketball team is still going. The CYO was very active at St. James. We used to work on Monday nights at the bingo and we would call the numbers back when somebody yelled bingo and then we'd get tips, which was really nice. A whole bunch of us would go over to the **Reo Diner** after and get hamburgers that were probably about twenty-five cents.

Brenda Velasco: So you did well but you had the bingo that's what kept the school going. Anything else you want to put in for recreation?

Peggy Catalano: Yes, in the wintertime we went ice skating down the pond in the back between North and South Park Drive again and then where the Woodbridge Apartments are now that was our sleigh riding hill. We were pretty upset when that got taken away from us.

Brenda Velasco: And that's right off of the Park Drive there?

Peggy Catalano: Yes, South Park Drive. We could sleigh ride right down or toboggan right down onto the ice.

Brenda Velasco: That must have been great and there wasn't that much traffic so....

Peggy Catalano: No, there was no traffic.

Brenda Velasco: That was great I would say. Anything else? Otherwise we'll go to Question #7.

Peggy Catalano: That's all.

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

Peggy Catalano: St. James School that was really the focal point in the community for us.

Brenda Velasco: You went to school there and how many siblings did you have?

Peggy Catalano: Just one brother.

Brenda Velasco: One brother, okay.

Peggy Catalano: And then the Peterson boys were like brothers to me.

Brenda Velasco: Sometimes it's better with cousins.

Peggy Catalano: Oh, yes. I was the youngest and I was the only girl. I always had to run to keep up with them because my mother would say you have to take her. I was the only kid in the first grade that could jump the brook, the little stream.

Brenda Velasco: You'd have to run fast if you had to go with those.....

Peggy Catalano: Because I had to keep up with them. If I lost them I had to go home.

Brenda Velasco: So you really had about four brothers keeping an eye on you all the time.

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: You say the church was the focal point of your community. You went to school there, attended Sunday mass and you also mentioned bingo. Were there any other activities at the church?

Peggy Catalano: We used to put on a minstrel every year and the school also put on a school play every year so we were always involved in that.

Brenda Velasco: And you're still involved in the church.

Peggy Catalano: Oh, yes.

Brenda Velasco: It still is a focal point.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, it doesn't go away.

Brenda Velasco: No, you've been ingrained.

Peggy Catalano: And then when we were kids we used to have to help the nuns after whether it was cleaning the blackboards or clapping, as they called it, the erasers to go get all the chalk off. Then we used to help Sister Mary Hugh who was there for thirty-some years. We used to help her in church. She would clean the altar and do the altar linens and we would help her dust the church. They only had one custodian so the kids helped and if we had to pull weeds outside we pulled weeds outside. Then the other sister that was there for many, many years too, a little over thirty years, was Sister Josepha who everyone was scared to death of; but I don't think she would have hurt a fly. She was always the first one at your house when somebody died or somebody got sick or whatever. There was a lot to do. You were kept busy.

Brenda Velasco: And helping with the church as well. It hasn't stopped.

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

Peggy Catalano: Well you knew everybody around you and it was a big family type thing. It wasn't really just you were in a neighborhood. Now in back of me on

Martool Drive I used to know everybody but five houses were sold in less than a year back there. I really don't know them. One of my neighbors put up a great big high fence and they came from New York and I guess they thought they needed high fences. I know very few of them right around me now. More and more people are strangers. My one next door neighbor has been there for about thirty-five or forty years. I know her pretty well.

Brenda Velasco: Which neighbor is this?

Peggy Catalano: John Nagy.

Brenda Velasco: A lot of changes.

Peggy Catalano: Oh, a lot of changes in the area.

Brenda Velasco: And you always felt safe here.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, and I still do really. I'll take the dog for a walk at night and I don't really feel intimidated by anybody. I think it's a safe town and our police are very nice here. I've had encounters with them with the position that I have up in St. James a few times, you know, when they had to call them. Anytime anything has happened in the area like my neighbor had a fire a year ago and they were just so nice and helpful as were the first aid and the fire department. I know most of the firemen from School Street. I feel that if you need something, they will always come through.

Brenda Velasco: And they usually do. The emergency services are excellent and I see this with Tooling Around the Township where they would donate a whole day to renovate a house or some of the other fundraisers we've had.

Peggy Catalano: Particularly the firemen really go out of their way to help people. There's a gentleman on School Street, Frank Maurer, he's in his eighties and they treat him so well. He lives by himself and he's catty-corner across from them. If he doesn't show up one day, he usually goes over there; they're over to check on him. In fact one day they called me that they couldn't get in and they put the ladder up and they got in and he was sick and they went in his bedroom window. They'll always call me or his cousin if something is wrong with him.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! That's great.

Peggy Catalano: They are really very good.

Brenda Velasco: It's a caring community.

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

Peggy Catalano: Of course Woodbridge Center was one of the biggest things that went on around here. It took all our berry picking and our woods and our hiking places away. That was kind of a big blow when it came in.

Brenda Velasco: That was in the 1960s right?

Peggy Catalano: Yes, and everybody said oh it's never going to last.

Brenda Velasco: Some of the individual stores might not have lasted.....

Peggy Catalano: But it's still there.

Brenda Velasco: And it's going strong. It's expanding and getting new stores in and everything.

Peggy Catalano: But everybody just had the attitude that it was too big. Of course all the construction on Route #1 and #9 and taking the circle away. Sometimes I

think there are too many malls. The other thing was the big train wreck. That was in '50 or '51.

Brenda Velasco: That's when you were in high school.

Peggy Catalano: No, I had just gone into nurses' training. It was that winter that's why I'm not sure if it was '50 or '51. I was a freshman at St. Peter's and I remember they even dragged us out thinking they were getting people coming in there from it because there were a lot of people injured and hurt and it was such a big awful, awful happening. That was probably the most horrible thing that ever happened in town.

Brenda Velasco: And it's one of the biggest train wrecks in the United States history and it was very unfortunate. So you were at St. Peter's in New Brunswick at this time?

Peggy Catalano: Yes, we had just started up there and we were freshmen and so we were kind of put over by the main. They thought that they were getting all these people and we all got called over to the hospital.

Brenda Velasco: Did they get people?

Peggy Catalano: We didn't get as many as they thought they were going to get but they did get some because Robert Wood was a really small hospital then too, it was Middlesex Hospital.

Brenda Velasco: So you were put on alert then and that was a spill over and unfortunately there were so many deaths.

Peggy Catalano: There were a lot of deaths then. It was just awful. So that was probably the biggest happening aside from the building of Woodbridge Center. Menlo Park of course too when that was built that was a big thing and that was an outdoor mall then.

Brenda Velasco: And then eventually they enclosed it.

Peggy Catalano: Yes and the biggest thing we used to do at Christmastime was go to Newark and go to **Bamberger's** which is now **Macy's**.

Brenda Velasco: That's right.

Peggy Catalano: It's not even in Newark anymore.

Brenda Velasco: And look at the window displays.

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And how did you get to Newark?

Peggy Catalano: We would always go on a Saturday when my father was off and he would drive. Once in a while we would take the train.

Brenda Velasco: Because you had the train station very near by.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, our other big excursion used to be to my father's family on Long Island in Ozone Park, once a month. When they were a little flush we got to take the train and when they weren't so flush we took the ferry.

Brenda Velasco: It was a nickel.

Peggy Catalano: We took the ferry with the car and I think maybe it was a quarter and then drove the rest of the way.

Brenda Velasco: That was one of the best spots-the Staten Island ferry.

Peggy Catalano: That was a great trip.

Brenda Velasco: That was one of the best and cheapest rides and if you went as a passenger without a car it was like a nickel. It was unbelievable. We're talking about the 1940s or 1950s.

Peggy Catalano: Well the late '30s and '40s and early '50s.

Brenda Velasco: Were there any sporting events, riots, discrimination?

Peggy Catalano: Not that I can remember anything.

Brenda Velasco: Okay.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Peggy Catalano: When my mother moved here in 1917 she never really became a native of Woodbridge because people wouldn't let her and I guess maybe I'm the same way. Even though we have a lot of people from out of the area, I still think there's a certain amount of camaraderie around. Especially I noticed it in the church and you know since I deal with a lot of indigent people. I meet people who are willing to help these people particularly in the food pantry and bringing food in for us to give to people. I think most people are generous and kind and want to help other people. I don't think we have too many who aren't, I really feel that. Even for instance in Town Hall you've got the likes of Donna Barcellona and Peter and Irene Allan and people who really go out of their way to help people. And again the fire department, the Woodbridge one, but the Avenel one as well because I see them helping people coming from the motels looking for assistance and they'll call me sometimes or they'll call the other churches up in Avenel, St. Andrew's or Presbyterian, to try to get them to help people so I think it still has a little bit of small town left in it.

Brenda Velasco: I hope it always does. That's what makes it so unique as big as we are because we're the fifth largest community.

Peggy Catalano: I don't feel like I live in a big city.

Brenda Velasco: So you're not planning on moving out?

Peggy Catalano: No, I'm not going anywhere.

Brenda Velasco: Nobody's going to let you go anyhow. We would block the roads on you; we need you.

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

Peggy Catalano: I only have one blood cousin left here, he's a second cousin. He and his wife are here but all the rest have, unfortunately, moved away or they're really up there in years and some have died recently. So I don't have too many in the family left. I have one niece. My brother's daughter lives up in Rhode Island. I don't see her too often but I talk to her on the telephone. I have to say that the Sisters of Mercy were very instrumental in my education and I think instrumental in St. James and particularly in St. Mary's in Perth Amboy. We'd keep things going and I think we got a very good education through them. Then I graduated from St. Peter's Hospital in New Brunswick and I worked other places. I worked in Elizabeth and Hillside. As a visiting nurse I also worked in Woodbridge Township in the health department with Mr. Bailey, at the time, in 1953, 1954 and 1955. He was a wonderful man; he was head of the health department. We were six nurses who did home visits from the health department at that time.

Brenda Velasco: So you had home visits from the Department of Health in the township.

Peggy Catalano: Yes, and he would send us out and we were supposed to charge for things. One day I said Mr. Bailey how much am I going to charge this lady? He said she doesn't have any money, charge her a nickel so she feels she's paying for it.

There was a man in Colonia and he said charge him fifty cents.

Brenda Velasco: Naturally Colonia had that reputation.

Peggy Catalano: He was just very good and we ran the Baby Keep Well Station, it was called then, and we also transported the kids when they couldn't get here. The kids in Keasbey had no way of getting to Woodbridge and we would go out and pick them up under the bridge when they didn't even have running water there then. You know some of the other doctors in town were really good too about treating the kids when they were sick. We were always on call and we visited all the new born babies, every new baby that was born in whatever hospital. We would get the birth certificate delivered and we would evaluate them and make sure that everything was okay in the home. Bunns Lane was built in the '50s, '49 or '50, so Bunns Lane was part of my area and Keasbey was part of my area and that was like going to another world. Bunns Lane, whenever the police had a problem we would have to go with them and whatever so that was an interesting part of my life for a short time.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and we're talking about public housing on Bunns Lane.

Peggy Catalano: There were five and then six nurses working for the health department.

Brenda Velasco: That was a large staff at that time.

Peggy Catalano: At that time but like I said we visited all the newborns.

Brenda Velasco: So you were busy because this is the post-World War II boom.

Peggy Catalano: Right.

Brenda Velasco: So there were babies.

Peggy Catalano: There were babies, there were lots of babies and then there was a great influx from Puerto Rico at that time, too. We had a really large influx from Puerto Rico at that time. The railroads were hiring and it was really tough for them like it is for the Mexicans now.

Brenda Velasco: Definitely, there's a culture, very different distinct culture and they're coming also from a rural area in many instances and it's family oriented. Did they come with their families?

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so that's one of the saving graces rather than just coming alone. Because you mentioned going back to the Reading Railroad where your mom ran that boarding house. Did the men come with their families from Pennsylvania?

Peggy Catalano: No, because they would only come up for the week. These were like particular groups that were here. One group was electricians and other ones worked, not on the rails themselves, they would work in a particular area where the dumpers were and things like that to keep everything. So there were two different mechanical groups and they would come up for a week at a time and as I said we got to know their families after a while because their families would come up after coming to our house. It was the same two groups all the time.

Brenda Velasco: So there was some permanence then. You knew them and their families weren't so far away.

Peggy Catalano: No, right.

Brenda Velasco: And then with the Puerto Ricans in.....

Peggy Catalano: The Puerto Ricans came in later, that was much later.

12. Any other stories or events that you'd like to discuss?

Brenda Velasco: Especially with the food pantry.

Peggy Catalano: Well the food pantry is really an eye opener. Having lived in the town all my life I never realized until 1999 and 2000 when I started working over there that there were so many poor people in the town. And it's not you know you sort of said well they came from Bunns Lane. Well they don't just come from Bunns Lane. They came from Colonia and they come from Avenel and Port Reading and Sewaren and every bit of the town and these are the people who are the working poor mostly. They're not just trying to get a handout they're here because they can't get the kind of jobs that pay enough for them to support living in Woodbridge Township because it is very expensive. Rents for apartments and houses are so high here that it's just impossible for them to get along on what they make. We even have some people who work two or three jobs and you know they got a couple of kids and they really work hard. I admire a lot of them and we try to weed out the freeloaders and we're always going to get those no matter where you are. But we had two hundred and one families last month. When I started ten years ago if we fed seventy-five we thought we had a big month.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! Bad economy and you've seen it. You've witnessed it with the food pantry and are you able to replenish.....

Peggy Catalano: So far we're staying on top of it. We had to buy more food these past several months than we ever did before and the schools are very helpful. We're the largest food pantry in town. There are, I think, eight others and they feed very few compared to us. But the other churches, including the Protestant churches and other Catholic churches help us out a lot.

Brenda Velasco: It's an interfaith.....

Peggy Catalano: It is an interfaith thing so we seem to stay on top of it. We have a lot of empty shelves. In fact, they just did a film for Channel 35 the other day up there and took pictures of our empty shelves. We've not had this long of a period where we don't have surplus food which we always had in our basement. It's completely empty now. With the holidays coming along we're hoping to get more and more and people are trying to be generous.

Brenda Velasco: Especially on a local level because they live here.

Peggy Catalano: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: It's going to be a tough, tough holiday season for many people.

Peggy Catalano: It is, it really is, and you know you feel so bad when you have to turn somebody away but you just reach a point where you can't take anymore in. So far I only had to stop one time in taking new clients and I feel I don't want to see anybody go hungry. We just try to interview them and if maybe one time will help them and if not they can come back another time but they usually come in once a month. We have three hundred and fifty-seven families registered and as I said we did two hundred and one last month out of that. And people try not to come if they, you know, are a little flush and they can get to the store.

Brenda Velasco: That doesn't always happen.

Peggy Catalano: It doesn't always happen.

Brenda Velasco: Especially the end of the month. Now with the Social Ministry you're also a.....

Peggy Catalano: I will take particularly elderly people to the doctors if they don't have family around here to take them and I'll go in with them. I'll follow up and make sure they're taking their meds and things like that and I'll check blood pressures for some of them so the doctor knows if his medicine is doing any good. If they have a dressing of some kind or need an injection, as long as I have an order from a doctor, I can do that for them.

Brenda Velasco: And this is relatively new within the past ten or fifteen years within the churches throughout the United States. What is the title?

Peggy Catalano: Well it's actually Parish Nursing but every church calls their little group something different. There is an organization which is kind of falling apart at this point and it was the Parish Nurses of Central Jersey and we used to meet up in Somerville all the time. But lately I don't know whether if everybody has been too busy or we just haven't been doing it and as nurses we have to keep up our continuing education so I go back two to three times a year to a class. My specialty was wound care when I came here but I still try to keep up with that.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and mainly the people who use this are your elderly people?

Peggy Catalano: Yes and they don't have to be from the parish.

Brenda Velasco: And there's a big need because so many families have moved away and we have.....

Peggy Catalano: And there's nobody for them to take them.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, and they can't drive.....

Peggy Catalano: They can't drive because they either get lost or just haven't kept up their license.

Brenda Velasco: So you're serving two different.....

Peggy Catalano: Groups.

Brenda Velasco: And I was able to get you here for an interview. You were able to fit this in on this afternoon. Is there anything else that you wanted to mention?

Peggy Catalano: No, nothing, so I think that covers about everything. I hope it does anyhow. In fact, I said and did a lot more than I wrote down because as you say once you start talking other things come back to memory.

Brenda Velasco: And your memory is good. I thank you very, very much Mrs.

Peggy Leahy Catalano.

Peggy Catalano: Thank you.

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After the formal interview concluded, Peggy described some details of the house she lived in. There was a dirt floor in the cellar. Wooden pegs were used in the huge attic and basement.