

Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interview

Mrs. Rankin

WPL16

(digital audio)

On August 8, 1978, Mrs. Rankin was interviewed by Paul Balog and Linda McDermott for the Woodbridge Public Library Oral History Interviews.

Mrs. Rankin: In 1921 we built a house on East Avenue, sold that, and then we built another house on East Avenue. Then my husband heard that this house was for sale and we wanted the waterfront so that's how we bought this house. This house was named the Bona Vista Cottage; it was a cottage in 1882, almost a hundred years ago. Now I'm sorry I don't know by whom it was built.

Paul Balog: Do you know who the original owner was?

Mrs. Rankin: It was Mrs. Raine that fixed it over and the second story was raised and another second story was put in. This level was put in and that's why it's lengthy and that was the living room. Then there was an L put on the back so it was just a monster. These projections here were put on inside, a sleeping porch was put upstairs and a bay window was put in. When we first came in here, in this house in '42, there were then over a thousand boats in the creek. I guess now there must be five or ten thousand because there are so many of them.

Paul Balog: May I ask when you were born?

Mrs. Rankin: I was born in Pennsylvania and came to Perth Amboy when I was three months old.

Paul Balog: What year was that?

Mrs. Rankin: 1900; I go right along with the year.

Paul Balog: Your parents, what did they do, what was their trade?

Mrs. Rankin: I.R. Robbins Lumber. My dad only had two girls so when I got married my husband was a teacher and my dad persuaded him to take a year's leave of absence and come to the lumberyard. He was a conniver. When he got him in there he got him to stay so it was Robbins Rankin Lumber and then the developers came along in the '50s and '60s like Howell Lumber Company over here. They just did us out and we had to sell. There were thirteen retail lumberyards around in this section and now I think there are three. But about Sewaren, of course you know the main social gathering place was the Land and Water Club at the foot of Fulton Street.

Paul Balog: Were you a member?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, indeed I was.

Linda McDermott: Could you tell us about some of the activities?

Mrs. Rankin: Well they had card parties for charity, bridge parties for charity and dances for charity. I think the charity included themselves, I don't mean that they took any of the funds but they wanted to get together; it was an excuse to get together. Then I suppose you know that

on down was where Royal Petroleum was before Shell and by Royal Petroleum they had swings and everything else there.

Paul Balog: The amusement park?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, the amusement park. That was before I came out here.

Paul Balog: When you came here was Royal Petroleum already in existence?

Mrs. Rankin: No they weren't. Shell had established and there was a trolley. The trolley came out over Broad Street to East Avenue and passed our house. When we first came out my husband took the trolley down to the lumberyard for about the first three months before we had a car.

Paul Balog: Do you remember the Sewaren Hotel?

Mrs. Rankin: No, that burned before I came out here.

Paul Balog: We have some photos that you may like to see.

Linda McDermott: Perhaps they might refresh your memory. Then again these might be way before your time.

Paul Balog: These are of Sewaren.

Linda McDermott: This is Boynton Beach, the picnic grove.

Mrs. Rankin: Well, my husband would know more about this. He was almost ten years older than I was and that's why he was out here. He used to come after school and take the bus and come out and take pennies for the slide to make money. He made a dollar a day and that was a lot then especially for a kid, an awful lot.

Linda McDermott: Do you remember were there bathing houses in existence then?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, and there were still bathing houses down there when we came out.

Linda McDermott: This was 1890.

Mrs. Rankin: Then, of course, the old station was up there and all that. It was a busy place when we first came out. Most everybody that lived here were commuters and commuted into New York City.

Linda McDermott: Do you remember the movies that had been filmed in Sewaren? This was in 1929. That was about when you were moving in.

Mrs. Rankin: '21 was when we moved in. Yes, I remember when they were making it.

Linda McDermott: Had you been in the movie or do you know anyone who had been? The name of the movie was Peacock Alley starring Mae Murray....

Paul Balog: Monty Blue.

Mrs. Rankin: All I remember was my little boy, who was born in '22, tried his best to get in it. If there was a way to get in the crowd he was in it. He's now a professor down at the Naval Academy.

Linda McDermott: This is also Boynton Beach; the pavilion is there.

Mrs. Rankin: No, I don't recall that.

Linda McDermott: No, I guess this would be way before you.

Mrs. Rankin: And I knew quite a few of the Mormons. Mrs. Ames lived up the street. She lives up on Helen and her daughter-in-law was my best friend.

Linda McDermott: Are there anymore Boyntons in the area?

Mrs. Rankin: I don't know if there are. And then, of course, you know the Boynton House over on Rahway Avenue. No, you kids are too young.

Paul Balog: The one that's set back?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes.

Paul Balog: That has a few houses around it now, is that right?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, a few of their houses are built everywhere. Now when you go from the corner up here over to Woodbridge across the overpass over here, it's been there for about twenty years, there might be twenty houses. They go all the way over or maybe only fifteen. Of course there are a lot of houses put in between here. Now next to Mrs. Clark is a little low house, you can see where the little low houses are and one little low one up here that they put in.

Linda McDermott: Now you have this dirt road behind your house.

Paul Balog: The Lane.

Linda McDermott: The Lane, now what had that been used for?

Mrs. Rankin: The road where?

Paul Balog: The Lane that runs behind.

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, the Lane. That was before we came here. I think it was about 1900. Ten feet was taken off of each lot over on East Avenue and over here. It was given to the township to make a lane for the utilities. Now all of our electric, gas, water needs, garbage and everything is collected up and down the Lane; nothing goes outright. It's supposed to make it nicer which it does.

Paul Balog: And that's true also for East Avenue? They collect back here for the East Avenue houses?

Mrs. Rankin: I think so. That's what I was told. Ten feet was given to the township but the darn thing isn't nearly as wide as that. Perhaps the shrubs and stuff are growing in because you can barely get along, you know, or go up and down there and it's maintained by the township.

Linda McDermott: Do they plow that in the winter?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh yes, they keep it opened but they plow Cliff Road first. Maybe it will be the second day they plow that. But they have to really plow that because if there were a fire all the fire hydrants and everything else are on the Lane so it's pretty well maintained.

Paul Balog: So you've been in Sewaren since you were three?

Mrs. Rankin: No, I was married when I was twenty-one and my mother had passed away so we lived with my dad for a little while. We moved out here in June, 1921.

Paul Balog: Where had you lived between Pennsylvania and here?

Mrs. Rankin: Perth Amboy.

Paul Balog: Oh, okay.

Mrs. Rankin: I lived on 110 High Street and built this house.

Paul Balog: We have a list of questions, just topics, that maybe we could talk about and one of the things was what were some of the social things

you did possibly as a young girl before you were married?

Mrs. Rankin: Before I was married in Amboy? Well, I belonged to a club and it was a Sunday class, Presbyterian Sunday School class founded by our teacher Mrs. Lyon whose husband was Judge Lyon. He was very well known in these parts and any old person would know who he was. We used to give parties and dances and things like that and buy things for the hospital. My mother was also treasurer of the Ladies Auxiliary of the hospital.

Linda McDermott: What was your maiden name?

Mrs. Rankin: Robbins. I.R. Robbins Lumber was first.

Linda McDermott: And that had been situated where?

Mrs. Rankin: It was situated on New Brunswick Avenue.

Paul Balog: Kind of near Hopelawn?

Mrs. Rankin: Well it was later in Hopelawn but originally it was on New Brunswick Avenue and we leased land from the Lehigh Valley. They wouldn't sell it to us and that was why it was later put on out on New Brunswick Avenue in Hopelawn.

Linda McDermott: And you had brothers and sisters?

Mrs. Rankin: I only had one sister. That's how my dad squeezed my husband into playing in the lumberyard because there weren't any boys. I had just one sister and she isn't married.

Paul Balog: What were the dances like that were given at that time?

Mrs. Rankin: The dances, what we did?

Paul Balog: Yea.

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, waltzes and two-steps and so forth.

Linda McDermott: And the music?

Mrs. Rankin: One of the main ones was they used to play so often was Let Me Call You Sweetheart. You still know that one.

Linda McDermott: Oh, yes.

Mrs. Rankin: And name some of the old ones and you probably got them if you can think of them.

Paul Balog: Oh, it was waltz music. Was any ragtime being played at that period?

Mrs. Rankin: I think in the '20s the ragtime came along; I think so mostly.

Paul Balog: So it was kind of pre-rag?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, and let's see I went to dancing school down at the Yacht Club in Amboy. If you had enough money you certainly got sent there.

Paul Balog: Was your family a member of the Yacht Club?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, yes.

Paul Balog: How have styles changed, let's say, when you were a teenage girl?

Mrs. Rankin: Well, a woman's dress went to about there. I still wore my dresses to about there in 1920 when I was married.

Linda McDermott: And hats?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, I would never go to church without a hat. Of course that was up to twenty years ago that you didn't go to church without a hat and

gloves. I'm real old fashioned. I'm real old fashioned in my ways too. I'm just so glad all this divorce business wasn't going on. Are you old enough for that? You don't look old enough. And living together and all that stuff and here's my daughter-in-law. She about fifty and do you know what she's doing? I have a screen that's torn and coming apart on the door out there and she says mom if you have the wiring I'll come over and fix it and she knows how to staple it. My husband didn't know how to boil water, didn't want to know, and I didn't want him to know. I wanted him to keep out of my way and I kept out of his. I had no idea on how to do anything like this and yet I thought I was liberated because I was put on a pedestal.

Paul Balog: Did your family used to go on summer outings?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, yes.

Paul Balog: Little trips and stuff?

Mrs. Rankin: Can I tell you something else, this is quite unusual. We had a 1900 Ford Rambler, one cylinder Rambler. It cranked on the side, had oil lights and one thing or another and was given to my dad by his father who lived up in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania in 1906. I guess we had one of about six or eight automobiles in Perth Amboy at that time.

Paul Balog: Yea, I would think 1904.

Linda McDermott: Now what was Perth Amboy like at that time, was Perth Amboy also a resort area as we see in here?

Mrs. Rankin: No, but it was a very going place. When we came there this is the way they got there. My grandfather, who had five sons and are workers said to my dad who was the oldest, now there's room for us all here and this is going to be the argument but you're going to have to get out on your own. So he said we'll take the Lehigh Valley Railroad and get on there and we'll look along the way as we come to different places; we'll find a place with a good location. In the meantime send Neva, Genevieve was my mother, and the two babies up to her mother and they'll look for a place to locate along the ride. So with ten thousand dollars he loaned from his dad, this sounds crazy, he leased the land, built an office, built a shed, bought a horse, bought a wagon and stocked some lumber. That was in 1900. As I said a dollar a day was good pay. How things have changed. Now a dollar for ten minutes is about right.

Paul Balog: Close to that.

Mrs. Rankin: When I think about my son down there at the academy and then along with him the professor at the academy is consulting in private and he gets a hundred dollars an hour and sometimes its two hundred dollars an hour with pay. He was telling me we're up to two hundred now mother.

Paul Balog: Your grandfather then had a lumberyard in Wilkes Barre?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, before 1900; eighteen something. He also went out to South Dakota looking for gold in a covered wagon and Chicago. They took a train, he and my grandmother and my dad and his brother. Then

Uncle Treat was born out there and they called him Freeman because he was out and he was free. That's why they called him Freeman anyway. He was the third son. He was born out there when my dad was a little fellow.

Paul Balog: Can you tell us something about maybe some of the outings that you used to take?

Mrs. Rankin: Well the biggest outing was to take a ride in the car and my tenant, on a Sunday, would give different kids on the street a ride in the car and that was the biggest and I mean like a mile. That was a long way. Then I remember in Amboy on New Brunswick Avenue going past the hospital. There was a hill and my dad used to pat the car on the side and say come on Lizzie, come on Lizzie. Isn't that funny? Do you have any more questions that you can think of?

Linda McDermott: Yea, I'd like to hear a bit more about Sewaren during the '20's. Was Sewaren still the resort area it had been during the '20s?

Mrs. Rankin: Well, no. During the '20s most of the people who lived here then were permanent. In the beginning, I think, Sewaren was homes. Cottages like this one was for somebody that lived in New York, that's what I understand. I got my information from Mrs. Ballard who died sometime ago but lived next door and she was the one that told me this house was a cottage. On the concrete post and pillar out there I would say they were pillars on beds and she would say they're columns. She always used to correct me. On the column out there it had Bueno Vista Cottage.

Linda McDermott: And what was Boynton Beach? What did Boynton Beach consist of when you moved in in 1921.

Mrs. Rankin: When I moved in they had sand that they would bring in from some place and dump into the foot of Ferry Street. It was where the park is there. My husband had that cleaned when he was on the Town Council to stop the oil people from coming up this way further and it did stop them. Then they jumped over so now they're all up above. Cassidy, who passed away, was going to name it Rankin Strip. He said we're going to have a strip there but the Town Council had a few people who lived here and didn't want it to become a problem so they couldn't call it Rankin Strip.

Linda McDermott: Now as far as the amusement area goes was the.....

Mrs. Rankin: Well they only had merry-go-rounds and Ferris wheels and all like that.

Linda McDermott: Were there a lot of out-of-towners?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, boats used to come down on Saturdays and Sundays particularly and bring boatloads of people from New York and Long Island. There was a big dock down there.

Linda McDermott: Had you spent a lot of time bathing?

Mrs. Rankin: Did I go down there bathing? No, I never did. It was considered a little one the rough side. It wasn't originally, I don't think, when this was a resort area. Then the hotel was there. I think it was a very refined area but afterwards. In fact, after the hotel burned down it

just went all to pieces, everything. But there were still boathouses down there along the water.

Linda McDermott: Was the water clean?

Mrs. Rankin: Friends of ours lived up the street here and we used to go swimming in the creek here. I taught my daughter and all her friends to swim in this creek and you wouldn't think of going somewhere now. Up the creek at Mueller's that was just beyond the church was where I taught my boys. I bought them down in a float and put a rope on them. Then when it was high tide, eight feet of water, I had the rope on them and taught them to swim. My son still, the one down at the academy, says mother you didn't teach us to swim you taught us to stay up. I said that's ninety percent of the battle.

Linda McDermott: But the water had been very clean at that time.

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, it was beautiful and clean.

Paul Balog: When you were younger in Perth Amboy did you use to bathe in the.....

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, yes. I'd go down to Bayard's Beach in Perth Amboy and my mother, who came from Pennsylvania in the mountains, was scared to death of swimming but they always had a lifeguard at Bayard's Beach. They probably did at this beach here too, I don't know, because I didn't see it. The hotel, I think, burned down before 1921.

Linda McDermott: I think in 1916.

Mrs. Rankin: 1917 or 1918, something like that. It was gone when we came out here and everything went down after that. So down at Bayard Beach I'd go along with my feet this way making believe that I was swimming this way. Then talk about learning to swim, I was determined I was going to swim. I'd see all these kids swimming and then I'd walk on my hands and kick my feet and my sister did the same thing. Nobody was taking swimming lessons then. I can't remember when I didn't swim though. I can remember doing that but I taught myself.

Linda McDermott: You always loved water.

Mrs. Rankin: Always loved the water. I dove in the waves and everything else.

Linda McDermott: You spent a lot of time boating also.

Mrs. Rankin: We used to go down to Augusta. Down there, before I was married, my husband had a canoe and we used to go canoeing when he was courting me. Then we had the canoe around here for a little while and then we sold the canoe because we couldn't cart it over from East Avenue where we had our first house. Then when we came here we bought the man's boat next door for seventy-five or eighty dollars, something like that. He wanted to sell his boat and we bought his boat.

Linda McDermott: Do you remember his name?

Mrs. Rankin: Wright.

Linda McDermott: Which is the house that's here on Cliff Road that supposedly, I think it's one of your neighbors on either side of you, had been doing some work in the basement of the home and had discovered

an underground tunnel that led from the basement to the water?

Mrs. Rankin: I heard some story like that too but I don't know anything about it. Sorry I can't help you. Could Mrs. Adams help you on that? That would be an oldie.

Linda McDermott: I thought perhaps she might.

Mrs. Rankin: And I was told many years ago it was the Wrights next door and Mavis lives there. But maybe Mrs. Clark can give you something but I heard the story like that.

Linda McDermott: Yes, it's interesting.

Paul Balog: When the oil companies came in what was the reaction of the town?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, it was terrible. We were terribly against it, all of us.

Paul Balog: Why was everybody up in arms?

Mrs. Rankin: Boynton Lumberyard was down there where Shell is now one of our competitors and even though Mrs. Ames was a Boynton and lived up the road here, up the other side of the church about four or five doors, the Boynton family sold their lumberyard to Shell and that's when they first came. I guess that quieted the people. Then after Shell came Royal and they backed out when my husband was on the Town Council. Let's see, my daughter was born in '39 and he had been on five or six years before that so it was about 1934 or 1935 when Royal came next and they were asking for rezoning because Royal wanted to buy it.

Linda McDermott: Were many of the Sewaren residents employed by this oil company?

Mrs. Rankin: Not that I know of. There are now different ones that live down there but I don't know of anybody up and down the street here.

Paul Balog: Why was everyone up in arms? It's kind of obvious but for the record.

Mrs. Rankin: Well down would go the value of your house if you had an oil tank and the two tanks across the way are liquid gas tanks and Mrs. Clark's daughter is the head of the group that has been battling it since before my husband passed away five years ago. He said then, Kay is only barking up a tree, they're going to have it and they wanted to put pipes underneath the creek up to Port Reading somewhere. The liquid gas was terribly inflammable. I don't think there is anything those tanks share. She got them all bunched together.

Paul Balog: I think you're right. I don't think there is anything up there.

Mrs. Rankin: I don't think there's anything and yet they've been there. Well they've been ready to be built more than because it's five years since my husband passed away and it was at least a year or two before that that Kay was working on it.

Paul Balog: That's Kay Burns?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes.

Paul Balog: Is Mrs. Burns home now or is she away also?

Mrs. Rankin: No, she works down in Gimpleman's in Perth Amboy.

Paul Balog: Maybe we should get in touch with her also.

Mrs. Rankin: She'll be home after six o'clock. She could tell you something about liquid gas tanks more than I could.

Paul Balog: Was Acker's boathouse here when you came?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh yes, and I knew Mrs. Acker.

Paul Balog: Can you tell us anything about what the boathouse was like? See we couldn't get in touch with any Ackers; I don't think there are any.

Mrs. Rankin: No, but maybe Mrs. Clark might know, I don't know. Did Mrs. Adams say anything about the Ackers?

Paul Balog: She remembered it but that was just about all.

Mrs. Rankin: Well that's about all I can do. I think that the Acker's house is down the end of, so I was told, the one down at the end of Broad Street and Ferry Street. It was moved there.

Paul Balog: And that was Mrs. Acker's home?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes.

Paul Balog: Oh, that's new. We haven't heard that.

Linda McDermott: Okay, this would be Ackers.

Paul Balog: I think her house is visible behind the boathouses.

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, in there. Now East Avenue goes straight down that way and Broad Street takes a jet out. If you go down the end of Broad Street and the corner of Ferry just before you come to that strip on the further side that way I'm pretty sure that's Acker's home.

Paul Balog: Okay, very good. How was it after the twenties when the country went into the Depression? How was it around this area at that time?

Mrs. Rankin: It was terrible everywhere.

Paul Balog: Because these were enormous homes to heat and to maintain I would think.

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, and we would never have been able to be this brand new. It was vacant for five years because the people who lived in it had to give it up because of taxes.

Linda McDermott: How many rooms have you here?

Mrs. Rankin: Well, there are three bedrooms upstairs and four bedrooms. My daughter got married. She met a fellow in college from California and went to California to live. My son was over in Korea at that time. Maybe he was still in the service. They had him reenlist over there. He was in the hospital once for a nervous breakdown and he was back two more times over there and then they brought him home here. They bought him home in a hospital gown.

Paul Balog: So you had moved here to this house during the Depression era?

Mrs. Rankin: We moved here in '42. We bought the house in August of '41 and moved here in March of '42. Every one of these walls was all falling down and everything. They cleaned it and couldn't get anybody to buy it and they said to my husband at the lumberyard, this real estate man, if you can get somebody to buy that or make an offer on the house he said I'll give you half of my commission.

Paul Balog: That was a deal.

Mrs. Rankin: Anyway my husband had the canoe and had to give it up. By

that time we had three boys and he wanted so bad to own along the waterfront. So he came home and said what do you say we sell this house and buy that one over there? He said I think I can buy it with a song and he said just make any kind of offer. Everybody says it's too big to put heat in it and this and that. So anyway, well, I sat in the middle of the floor and I said I'll cry if I had to take care of that monster. Anyway in those days my little girl was just three and a half. I had a girl that came after school to sort of help with her and I had a woman come in and clean three days a week which would be a catastrophe now with the price. But anyway, he took the back extension off in '61. He said we can't live there alone so there is one of the bathrooms and the large bedroom of the house in on the back house and then we had what we called the recreation room. We had a pool table for the boys with a big ping pong board that you could stick on the side and they put that on top so when you play ping pong the room is pretty big. He put that into a living room and kitchen combination with a little L on it for the dinette and built a table and benches for the dinette. Then over the garage there were three bedrooms and a bath and those were for three maids that worked in this house around 1900 or 1910 so he made that into an apartment with a living room, bedroom, kitchen and dinette. It has fourteen windows in it; it's a good sized place. There were three garages up there and in one garage my husband put a little oil burner so they could furnish their own heat. On the back it was already hard to keep that hot because of there being three sides so he put gas baseboard heat and they had their own heat. This way I got rent from two tenants and it buys me oil for here and pays my taxes so I'm doing alright.

Paul Balog: Do you still own the waterfront property?

Mrs. Rankin: Oh, I wish I did. He had an accident at the lumberyard and cut this finger off. He was getting ready to make that road right in the back of the church in back of Jackson's Drugstore and he always said that road was a memorial to his hand. It was a Saturday morning and he was getting ready for the carpenter who would come in on Monday. He was always saying to the boys when they'd go down there to have respect for the electric saws. Until they were sixteen they were not allowed to start them at all. Then he himself took his finger off and took all the membranes there at the end of this finger. The hand was just a wreck. So he finally went to a hand surgeon and he took the tendon from over here, the little finger and this one. In the end you hardly noticed that his hand looked like that. Then they put some sort of a tendon up here. He drove a car and everything else.

Paul Balog: And it was after that you sold the waterfront property?

Mrs. Rankin: Yes, it was after that I sold the waterfront property because we had to use a sailboat. He and my older son built one at the lumberyard together and then when we bought this house he built the land. It was a sailboat and a motorboat, both, and they slept two in the gallery. Oh we had a great time.

Paul Balog: Wasn't that a big white schooner or a yacht that Mr. Wright had? That's the one that you bought?

Mrs. Rankin: Well I wouldn't call it a schooner, it was twenty-eight feet I

think. It was a pretty good size.

Paul Balog: Whatever happened to the sailboat?

Mrs. Rankin: After he hurt his hand he gave it to my son down in Annapolis and my son came up and brought up his brother-in-law and then Mr. Rankin met them. He traveled with them all the way down the Delaware Canal and took it down there. My son had it for about five years and then he asked his dad if he'd mind if he sold it for a glass boat because he wanted to sail in the races.

After the interview Mrs. Rankin showed Paul Balog and Linda McDermott her daughter's entire artist works.