

Oral History Interview
Raymond J. Hughes, Jr.
WH073

(written transcript and digital audio)

On January 22, 2010, Raymond J. Hughes, Jr. was interviewed at the Henry Inman Library at 1:00 P.M. by Brenda Velasco.

Brenda Velasco: Raymond has been forty years as a volunteer with the Colonia Fire District #12. He currently is a commissioner, he was a Fire Chief, and he's a second generation, I believe, involved.

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

Raymond Hughes Jr.: My full name is Raymond Joseph Hughes, Jr. of Colonia and I was born August 8th, 1947.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, two years after the war.

2. How long have you lived in Colonia?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I've lived in Colonia for sixty years.

Brenda Velasco: Where in Colonia did you live most of your years or where did you grow up?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I grew up on Florence Avenue in Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: And currently you live on.....

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Inwood.

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I was only two years old when we moved to Colonia. I assume it was to get out of the city.

Brenda Velasco: Which city are we talking about?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Jersey City and I think my father was working in Staten Island at the time so it was closer to his work from here and then he ended up getting a job with the township.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and because of the proximity and probably he liked it better here.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Well it was rural; it was a lot nicer place.

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Colonia was quite rural at the time we moved here. There were dirt roads, ditches, no sewers, no development-basically farms. There were farms by the firehouse, School 21 and there was a farm by the Parkway and the high school. There was an airport on Lake Avenue in Colonia and Clark; it was called the Westfield Airport. As far as the township services, my uncle ran the private sanitation for the Township. The stores were basically mom and pop stores: corner or

deli stores. Rahway and Plainfield were the big cities. Colonia also had bus routes down Inman Avenue.

There were one or two houses of worship when we first moved here. There was a nondenominational hall where St. John Vianney Preschool is and a Baptist church behind **Ace Hardware**. St. Gertrude's Cemetery was on Inman Avenue. I attended St. Cecelia's School in Iselin. My brother and sister attended Claremont School (20) when it was built (1958). I attended Colonia Middle School for one year – Grade 9. Then I attended Woodbridge High School for Grades 10 to 12 on split sessions. I graduated with eight hundred students in the Class of 1966. (Kennedy High School opened in 1964; Colonia High School opened in 1967)

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: There was no post office on Inman Avenue at the time. The post office was located in a building at the train station at New Dover Road and Route #35. I was drafted in 1967 and served nineteen months in Vietnam. I was able to leave five months earlier since I extended for thirty days. The firehouse was located at the same site on Inman Avenue; it was expanded on the lot next to it. There was no Henry Inman Library (1966); the Colonia library was located at the intersection of New Dover Road and Chain O' Hills. That had the largest segment of the Colonia population during this time. At the time, Merrill Park was the only real park with real baseball fields. Inman Park had a baseball field. It also was the host site for the carnivals held in the 1960s. There was a Civic Club on the corner of Inman Avenue and Conduit Way that was quite popular.

6. *What did you do for recreation?*

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I played a lot of baseball. There were no malls, videos, nor television. I also fished at Milton Lake by the Colonia/Rahway border. There was an airport on Lake Avenue by Skyline Drive. The main means of transportation was riding my bike or walking. I did take a school bus to Woodbridge High School.

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: When I was growing up the main focal point in the community was either the Civic Club and/or the Firehouse. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was an incident with the Colonia Fire Department Commissioners and it split into two fire departments. Both were located on Inman Avenue; one was located at the VFW and the other at the present site. Consequently, the fire district was abolished in 1951 (day of the train wreck) and reappointed in 1955. Colonia had fire engines but no fire district. Carnivals were held next to the firehouse in a vacant lot; this property since was sold to stores. The carnivals by the Pumpkin Patch Creek lasted a week.

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I liked Colonia at the time because it was neighborly, not very big and everybody knew everybody. Nobody locked doors; it was a real nice place. My uncle lived next door and when he died, my aunt continued to live there. The fire

department members were our friends; we were one big family. Where I lived there were few houses. Later a development of sixty to eighty homes was built off Patricia It was called Duke Estates. While the Colonia Country Club was on the other side of the town, it was part of Colonia Fire District 12 prior to 1972.

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

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall any particular developments.....

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: The closest one to me was Dukes Estates. I think that was probably the first one that was started.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, what streets does that encompass?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Patricia, Linda, Frederick.....

Brenda Velasco: And then Dukes Avenue that cuts across.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Where Dukes Road was there and part of Patricia was there already for some houses on top and down the bottom, not in the middle, that area near Wendy Road.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and that was close to you so you had a field day there.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, it was directly behind us.

Brenda Velasco: And you also mentioned about this was a mixed neighborhood in some of the areas.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Definitely.

Brenda Velasco: And there were no problems with discrimination?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: None that was obvious.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and then I know with the fire department we've had a history of taking people in there too.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Volunteers have been of different backgrounds.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Very different.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge/Colonia today?

Brenda Velasco: You're still in Colonia.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Still in Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: What do you like about Colonia today?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: It's just a nice place to be. It's a nice community. You don't know your neighbors as easy as you used to but no matter where you go you meet people, they're friendly as busy as they are; it's just a good place to be.

Brenda Velasco: Do you lock your doors?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: There have been times I left them open, not on purpose, but....

Brenda Velasco: I know forgetful and twisting???

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Now a day you have to.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and we have an excellent fire department too.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, we do.

Brenda Velasco: You and your father were part of the contributors in making it so good.

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

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: A daughter who got married and moved to Hopelawn and got divorced and moved back home with my grandson and my wife, Karen, of course.

Brenda Velasco: Was your wife from Colonia?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes she was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so you were both former.....

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: She was born in Perth Amboy and I think she lived in Port Reading for a very short time as a baby and was adopted by a German couple from Colonia. She's lived her sixty plus years; actually sixty-one years.

12. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?

Brenda Velasco: You were just talking about your mom and the fire department.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, the fire department had a Ladies Reserve which some fire departments still have it now but most don't. The Ladies Auxiliary basically would run functions to help raise money and if they had bad fires they would come out with coffee or soda or food to feed the guys.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and your mom's name was Rita.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And she was involved because of the Ladies Auxiliary. Does Colonia Fire Department still have a Ladies Auxiliary?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: No, we don't.

Brenda Velasco: What type of functions did they have?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Well we ran dances. I'm not sure what they did because I wasn't involved. They didn't have a really big hall and we had to either pull the fire trucks out or whatever.

Brenda Velasco: Any big fires that you recall, any notable fires or other things?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Well, actually one that I remember. I don't mind getting up. When I was working, it didn't make a difference if I was sleeping and awoken but the only day I don't want to hear the fire whistle is usually Christmas morning. We had a fire on Christmas morning in 1972 or 1973. It was actually in Avenel's district over by the Country Club and it came in as a burglar alarm but when the police car pulled up it was actually a fire. A seven year old girl died in the fire and her father was severely burned. Basically, you know, at that time I was only around my early twenties and would still be out on the street playing with the neighbor's kids who were that age, you know, from that age up. It was pretty hard to take and we really didn't get too much support from the Council and stuff at that time. Everybody was blaming us that it took us too long to get there but, you know, that wasn't the fact. We did feel good that the grandfather of the girl who was a fireman in Sweden came over here and told us we did everything possible. That made us feel better.

Brenda Velasco: So that was when you were first becoming involved with the fire department.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, I was only on a couple of years.

Brenda Velasco: Have we lost any other people?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: There have been an occasional few but at least an older person has lived much of their life and if something happens it happens but for a child, you know, they haven't had a chance.

Brenda Velasco: No, and seven years old. One of the programs that I think the fire district should be so proud is you go into the schools now. Don't you, for the elementary schools?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: We used to go into the schools but now we actually bring the schools here to our firehouse.

Brenda Velasco: This is the elementary schools you're talking about.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Actually any school that wants to come here. We've actually had teachers who have brought kids in from Newark and other places that live in Colonia, a teacher, and they've brought them to our firehouse for like Fire Prevention Week. Basically anyone who wants to come, we just make sure we have somebody there for them and we do something for them.

Brenda Velasco: How about pre-school and kindergarten?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Preschools we usually go there.

Brenda Velasco: So education, preventing fires, is.....

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Well at the early ages it's basically just preventing fire traps. That's all they know. You're really not going to get much across other than the importance of a smoke detector and getting out of the house. That's the most important thing we can preach to them at that age. As they get a little older there is a little more you can talk to them about. But the majority of the time if they come here or we go there their eyes are on the fire truck.

Brenda Velasco: Well that's big and shiny.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Right, so we're just trying to get the message across as best we can for that age group.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, but I know it extends right from preschool and you're dealing with three year olds up through the elementary school. Then also with the fire department there is another part of education. You have, within the past ten or fifteen years, you have an Explorer's program.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Correct, yes, fourteen to eighteen year olds.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall when that was started?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Not the exact date. I would say probably twelve to fifteen years.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, after 1996 it was started, I think.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, probably.

Brenda Velasco: With the Explorers, what are their duties and how many do you have in there right now?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Right now, I think we have thirteen. Their duties are basically the same as every fireman. Before they can ride the fire truck, they have to learn where everything is and how to wear an air pack. The only thing they can't do is go inside a burning structure be it training or a real fire. We also limit them to any kind of a serious HAZMAT or a serious accident. We sort of like keep them in the background, you know, with the rigs.

Brenda Velasco: So education has become an integral part?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, because they're learning the fire service plus the fact that we demand that they have a minimum of C grades or else they can't be on the Youth Explorer programs. So they're getting disciplined; they're getting structure and

they're getting an education in school because they know if they don't do well, they can't stay.

Brenda Velasco: And they've also seen positive role models within the community which you're not going to say with the fire department, with volunteerism.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Right, I mean the fact is that most of the kids the Explorer program come in through other kids. So we assume that they are setting a good example and letting them know that-hey, this is a good place to be and we don't have a shortage of getting kids to come in.

Brenda Velasco: No, you've got thirteen young people. Now is this open to both male and female?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Male and female. We had one female; she didn't last long. She was actually a daughter of one of the fireman.

Brenda Velasco: And you're also involved with the Colonia First Aid Squad, too.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: I never joined the squad but for the longest time I worked shift work so I was always, probably close to twenty years, available for them in the daytime. I would drive and help out with them in the daytime when they had a problem getting people.

Brenda Velasco: So you've had an extensive full time career, which you are now retired, but it was an extensive volunteer career as well and that's what keeps Woodbridge going and you're still doing it.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Yes, still doing it. I mean the other thing is is people talk about giving back, I mean, I'm not sure if I'm giving back but, you know, it's my community.

Brenda Velasco: Well you're making it a better place. Anything else that you want to mention?

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: No, that's probably about it.

Brenda Velasco: Alright. Well, I thank you and I'd never really known about the split in the two fire departments, that we had two fire departments at one time.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: Actually if you read the book from Dave Miller about Colonia it's in there. It actually goes into detail of what happened on December 12th.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, well I thank you very much. Sorry about the technical difficulties and an interesting interview. I not only thank you for the interview but the volunteer work that you do so much as well as the other fireman. So thank you.

Raymond Hughes, Jr.: You're welcome.