

Oral History Interview
Robert Thompson
WH046

(written transcript and digital audio)

On May 27, 2009, Robert Thompson was interviewed at Evergreen by Brenda Velasco. Also interviewing were students from the Avenel Middle School and Iselin Middle School: Humza Farrukh of Avenel (AMS), Sandra Souied of Port Reading (AMS), Regina Poerio of Port Reading (AMS), Kaitlin Murphy of Port Reading (AVS), Deanna Della Torre of Colonia (IMS), Julienne Viuya of Iselin (IMS), Ayushi Pathak of Iselin (IMS). Also in the audience were Nancy Paul from the Woodbridge Board of Education and Dan D'Archi, Colonia historian.

Brenda Velasco: Humza, we'll start off with you.

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

Robert Thompson: My name is Bob Thompson. I live in Colonia.

Brenda Velasco: And what was your date of birth?

Robert Thompson: My date of birth? September 27, 1923.

Brenda Velasco: How old are you then?

Robert Thompson: Eighty-five.

Brenda Velasco: Wow! This is going to be a great interview. Okay, Sandra, question two.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

Robert Thompson: Eighty years.

Brenda Velasco: Regina, question three.

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

Robert Thompson: I was born in Perth Amboy and we lived in Perth Amboy and I was only five years old then and I don't really know why we moved but we moved to Fords.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Kaitlin you're next with question four.

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

Robert Thompson: There have been many changes. Streets have been paved, sidewalks had been laid, parks had been developed, and many houses built. There used to be many vacant lots and now they are all filled up with houses and new streets.

Brenda Velasco: What street did you live on in Fords?

Robert Thompson: In Fords, I lived on Woodland Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: How many houses were on that street when you first moved there?

Robert Thompson: When we moved there, there was a house on top of the hill and that was the only house on that side of the street between Grant Avenue and Mary Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And now?

Robert Thompson: And now there are many houses on both sides of the street.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall any stores?

Robert Thompson: Yes, **Sisolak's** which is still there incidentally and over on Ford Avenue we had **Toth's Meat Market** and **Pietuski's Grocery Store**.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, do any of you notice what's missing there from where you live in Iselin or Woodbridge? These were not big stores, were they?

Robert Thompson: No, these were just neighborhood grocery stores. There were no supermarkets in those days.

Brenda Velasco: How about houses of worship?

Robert Thompson: There was a Catholic Church on Amboy Avenue and Ford Avenue. There was a Lutheran Sunday School on King George Road and an Episcopal Church on Hoy Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Are they still there?

Robert Thompson: The Sunday school isn't there anymore but the other churches are there.

Brenda Velasco: And what schools did you go to?

Robert Thompson: I went to No. 14 School on Ford Avenue from grades one to six, then No. 7 School on King George Road for grades seven and eight and then to Woodbridge High.

Brenda Velasco: And where was Woodbridge High?

Robert Thompson: On Barron Avenue. There was only one high school for the entire township then.

Brenda Velasco: What class did you graduate with then?

Robert Thompson: 1941.

Brenda Velasco: What happened in that year everybody? Did anybody study about that event in 1941?

Humza: World War II?

Brenda Velasco: You got it Humza, World War II.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: So you graduated when we were at war.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let's go back and look at the grades that he attended. What grade is missing there that you probably attended?

Student: Kindergarten?

Brenda Velasco: Kindergarten, right. Did you have to go to kindergarten?

Robert Thompson: I don't think we had a kindergarten in those days.

Brenda Velasco: Kaitlin, do you think we completed that question? Do you have any other questions for question four?

Kaitlin: No.

Brenda Velasco: You're satisfied? Okay, then next we're going to go to Deanna for question five.

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

Robert Thompson: There was one firehouse on Corielle Street.

Brenda Velasco: Is that still there today?

Robert Thompson: No, the firehouse is now on King George Road in the new building and what were the other items?

Deanna: Libraries, post office, parks.

Robert Thompson: Yes, there was a library on Corielle Street and that has been moved too.

Brenda Velasco: Who ran that library? Was that part of the township?

Robert Thompson: Yes, Mrs. Hansen was the librarian.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and I think this is also the Fords Women's Club that were staffing it.

Robert Thompson: Yes, that's right and the post office was on King George Road at that time. Now it's on New Brunswick Avenue in the new building. And we had one park in Fords, the Fords Park on King George Road. That was one of the roads to Woodbridge out of Fords.

Brenda Velasco: Did you attend it?

Robert Thompson: The library?

Brenda Velasco: The parks.

Robert Thompson: Oh, the park, yes. The park had a little playground, a couple of swings, a couple of bamboo slides, a couple of see saws and a baseball field. I played baseball there.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, we went over the schools but one of the schools isn't there anymore.

Robert Thompson: No. 7 School isn't.

Brenda Velasco: Right, No. 7 School is now closed. Okay, Julienne, question six.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Robert Thompson: For recreation I played baseball and a little football. I was never big and heavy so football was not one of my sports.

Brenda Velasco: Where did you play?

Robert Thompson: In fields. There were a lot of fields in Fords then and you played in fields or in the Fords Park which was a developed baseball field.

Brenda Velasco: So you had to make up your own fields then?

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Which there was no Woodbridge Youth Recreation at the time; it was Bob Thompson and his friends.

Robert Thompson: That's right.

Brenda Velasco: Was Varady's there? Were there any picnic groves?

Robert Thompson: Varady's Grove was up on Ford Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: And what's there now?

Robert Thompson: Houses, a lot of houses.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so a lot of (areas) where you played are now houses.

Robert Thompson: That's right.

Brenda Velasco: And that's that Lafayette School section.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Ayushi, question seven.

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

Robert Thompson: Well the Fords Lion's Club ran programs for children and the Women's Club with the library.

Brenda Velasco: So it was basically volunteer organizations?

Robert Thompson: Yes, basically.

Brenda Velasco: And what programs did the Lion's Club run? Do you remember?

Robert Thompson: I know they gave packages to the children at Christmas, candy packages. I don't remember what else they were involved in. They had many projects.

Brenda Velasco: Okay while we're talking about Christmas, what were some of the things you received for Christmas?

Robert Thompson: Well, it was during the Depression in those days. I didn't know the word Depression in those days but now when I look back I know why I wasn't able to get ten cents to go to the movies.

Brenda Velasco: What were some of the gifts you got for Christmas?

Robert Thompson: The gifts were mostly clothing and then you'd get a little toy.

Brenda Velasco: A toy.

Robert Thompson: A toy is right.

Brenda Velasco: Now you mentioned the movies, where were the movies?

Robert Thompson: Right on New Brunswick Avenue, the Fords Theatre.

Brenda Velasco: And how much did it cost? You mentioned the price before.

Robert Thompson: Ten cents to go to a movie, twenty-five cents for adults.

Brenda Velasco: Ten cents for children and Ayushi how much do you pay to go to the movies now?

Arisha: Seven dollars.

Brenda Velasco: Seven dollars.

Robert Thompson: Oh my gosh!

Brenda Velasco: Were you ever able to get to the movies?

Robert Thompson: Yes, occasionally.

Brenda Velasco: What type of movies did they have? Was it just one movie?

Robert Thompson: No there was the main feature, usually a secondary and a comedy.

Brenda Velasco: So you had three different shows.

Robert Thompson: Three shows in one performance, yes.

Brenda Velasco: For ten cents?

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That was a good buy.

Robert Thompson: It sure was.

Brenda Velasco: When did you usually attend the movies?

Robert Thompson: On Saturday afternoons because on Saturday they had a serial. It was John Wayne or these other stars then in a serial, a chapter, and the little performance ended with something that made you want to come back again next week to see the next chapter.

Brenda Velasco: It left you hanging.

Robert Thompson: It left you hanging is right.

Brenda Velasco: And if you had the dime, you were going back next week.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, Humza, question eight.

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

Robert Thompson: I lived in three different sections of Woodbridge. In Fords I liked Fords because my friends were there, my neighborhood friends, I liked it because my friends were there. When I moved to Colonia I liked it because of the area. I'm right across from a county park.

Brenda Velasco: Which park was that?

Robert Thompson: Merrill.

Brenda Velasco: When did you move there?

Robert Thompson: 1956.

Brenda Velasco: So you weren't a child anymore?

Robert Thompson: No, I was married when we moved there.

Brenda Velasco: Was there another section that you lived in?

Robert Thompson: In Woodbridge. When I first got married I had an apartment in Woodbridge. My wife was born in Fords and we both wanted to stay in Fords but we couldn't find the house that we wanted. So we found an apartment in Woodbridge Proper.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Sandra, question nine.

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

Robert Thompson: Yes. I was a member of the Fords First Aid Squad and in 1951 there was a train wreck in Woodbridge that the squad responded to. I didn't respond with the rest of the members, I was assigned to the headquarters to answer the telephone. There were eighty-four people killed in that train accident.

Brenda Velasco: How long were the men from the Fords First Aid because this was Woodbridge Proper but Fords responded?

Robert Thompson: All of the first aid squads in the township responded to that.

Brenda Velasco: And they were gone the whole day and night?

Robert Thompson: It was daylight hours and there were a good number of hours to get everybody taken care of.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so that was that big accident. How about the construction? Because when you moved from Perth Amboy you played in fields.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: They're not there.

Robert Thompson: No.

Brenda Velasco: Did you see all the houses going up?

Robert Thompson: In Perth Amboy?

Brenda Velasco: Not Perth Amboy.

Robert Thompson: Okay, I'm in Fords now. Yes, there were a lot of fields and I saw a lot of construction. Some individual homes and others building projects: multiple housing.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and in particular which areas?

Robert Thompson: Menlo Park Terrace and Lafayette Estates. They were the two big ones.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, a lot of people live there.

Robert Thompson: They sure do.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, next we will go to Regina for question ten.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Robert Thompson: It's a nice place to live. The people are nice and it is in a central location where you can get on a train or a bus and go places. You can go to New York or go down the shore. You got the highways, the big highways that go through town.

Brenda Velasco: Are you involved in any activities in Woodbridge? Because you were a volunteer for a while with the.....

Robert Thompson: With the first aid squad.

Brenda Velasco: Yes in Fords. Do you attend the Community Center or Evergreen?

Robert Thompson: No.

Brenda Velasco: And we have the Senior Olympics coming up.

Robert Thompson: Yes, that's right.

Brenda Velasco: In September, I believe. Okay, Kaitlin, question eleven.

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

Robert Thompson: No, not in Woodbridge. My wife passed away five years ago and I have a sister down in Whiting and I had a brother and sister out in California and they were much older than me and they also have passed away.

Brenda Velasco: So you're the only survivor.

Robert Thompson: Me and my sister in Whiting.

Brenda Velasco: Okay. Deanna, question twelve.

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

Nancy Paul: Can I just break in here. Did we ask Mr. Thompson what his occupation was?

Brenda Velasco: No we didn't.

Nancy Paul: I think that would.....

Robert Thompson: That was a big thing.

Nancy Paul: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: That's important. You're holding out on us.

Robert Thompson: I was a police officer in Woodbridge. I became a police officer in 1953 and I was there for thirty-five years and rose to the position of Deputy Chief of Police and retired in 1988.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, how about as a police officer did you experience any events that stand out in your mind?

Robert Thompson: No, I guess it was the run of the mill events. I was a detective so I investigated a lot of burglaries: house breaking and entries. And I was also in charge of deaths by auto. Whenever there was a death by auto I got a call and investigated that. I put the case together for the grand jury and ultimately to the Prosecutor's Office.

Brenda Velasco: Were there a lot of deaths by auto in any particular place in Woodbridge?

Robert Thompson: No. With all the highways and roads that we had they were scattered around.

Brenda Velasco: Then would you say this is a fairly safe community?

Robert Thompson: Yes. We have a good police force.

Brenda Velasco: They're also accredited too now.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: They go through accreditation, one of the few.

Robert Thompson: When I went on the job there were sixty-six men. Now they're up to over two hundred, two hundred and seven.

Brenda Velasco: So we really expanded.

Robert Thompson: Sure have.

Brenda Velasco: Anybody else have any questions? Yes, Kaitlin.

Kaitlin: What was it like to witness the Woodbridge train wreck?

Robert Thompson: Well as I said before I wasn't on the scene. I was assigned to headquarters in Fords to answer the telephone.

Brenda Velasco: Were you a policeman then?

Robert Thompson: No, I wasn't a policeman in those days.

Brenda Velasco: That was 1951, the train wreck.

Robert Thompson: That was 1951.

Brenda Velasco: And then in '53 you became a policeman.

Robert Thompson: '53 I became a policeman.

Nancy Paul: Did that influence your choice of a career do you think or was there only one event that influenced you?

Robert Thompson: I don't remember anything specifically. I remember the war, certainly, but not any activity or feelings by the township residents.

Brenda Velasco: But you lived through the Depression too in Woodbridge.

Robert Thompson: Oh, yes.

Brenda Velasco: Tough times.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: How did that impact you, the Depression?

Robert Thompson: As I said before, I didn't know the word Depression in those days but I know that I couldn't get ten cents to go to the movies and we never went on a vacation and we never had an automobile. I'm talking about the family now, my father and mother and brother and sisters. We just lived the way you had to live and didn't know any other way.

Brenda Velasco: And everybody else was basically in the same boat.

Robert Thompson: They were all in the same boat; they were all living the same way.

Brenda Velasco: When did you get TV?

Robert Thompson: I got married in 1953 and we bought our own TV soon after and I bought my mother and father their first TV. It was a used set.

Brenda Velasco: So about 1953?

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: After World War II.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Were you in the service?

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Because you graduated in.....

Robert Thompson: I graduated in June of '41, Pearl Harbor was in December and I enlisted in February, the following February. I served four years in the Coast Guard. In those days a lot of ships were being torpedoed off the New Jersey coast and the Coast Guard had a drive on for men for patrolling the coast and my friend said, what do you say we join? I said, okay. I was eighteen years old and I had my father's written permission to join but the other fellow didn't have a high school education and he was rejected. So I had a high school diploma and they took me and I served four years including time in France.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, Sandra.

Sandra: Was there discrimination in Woodbridge? If so, was it like bad or serious?

Robert Thompson: I never knew of discrimination. Even on the police force there was no discrimination.

Brenda Velasco: Anybody else have any questions? We have to conclude but before we do, how could you be in the Coast Guard and be in France? That's what I want to know.

Robert Thompson: They have coasts too.

Brenda Velasco: That's a good place.

Robert Thompson: I was in the munitions detail. The Coast Guard was responsible for loading and unloading munitions ships and I was sent to France. First we were unloading munitions and when the war was over there was so much ammunition in France we had to get it back to America and we were loading it again.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, that explains the mystery. You had a good position then.

Robert Thompson: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Anybody else have another question? So we thank you all and Mr. Thompson for coming in.

Robert Thompson: My pleasure. I'm honored to be here.

Brenda Velasco: And we're honored to have you. Thank you again.