

Oral History Interview
Todd Howell
WH007

(written transcript and cassette)

On May 12, 2008, Todd Howell was interviewed at the Woodbridge Community Center by Brenda Velasco and students Ruhy Patel (Mawbey Street #1) and Srujanee Pradhan (Mawbey Street #1). In the audience, were Vincent Soccodatto(supervisor) and Glenn Lottman (G &T) as well as other G & T students-Rupesh Chinta, Katherine Marciniak, Rita Nasr, Louis Polise, Midori Yang.

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

My full name is Todd Howell. I was born July 28, 1940 in Rahway Hospital.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

I have lived in Woodbridge and Sewaren combined -all my life.

Brenda Velasco: So that is approximately

Ruhy Patel and Srujanee Pradhan: Sixty-eight years.

Todd Howell: Your math is good but you aged me about a year since I will be sixty-eight in July... Old people are sensitive.

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

My family also my mother and my father also were from Woodbridge and their parents and their parents. The Howells came to Woodbridge Township via my father's father around 1908. He married a girl named Alice Turner and the Turner family goes back to the 1700s here in Woodbridge Township. So on both sides we go back a long ways.

Brenda Velasco: You are one of the original families... a descendant....

Todd Howell: Yes. The Turners lived in Port Reading and they had a giant farm. When they broke up the farm, they named **Turner Street** in Port Reading after that branch of the family so.. that's where they come from. The Howells-my grandfather lived here and he lived some of the time in Woodbridge proper and the last home he lived in was Sewaren . The street right up the street from this Center is Howell Avenue was named after him; he owned some property up there

Brenda Velasco: But Howell Avenue is in Fords.

Todd Howell: Actually it's in Fords and Fire District #1 but it is actually in a Fords mailing address. That's exactly right.

Brenda Velasco: You were from all over the Township. Then your comments can be for all over the Township.

Todd Howell: Yes. When my mother and father were married in 1938, they lived on Rahway Avenue across the street from the Barron Arts Center which was a library at that time. Then they moved to Vanderbilt Place up on Ridgedale Avenue. Then they moved to Sewaren and then they had a big old house. I had two sisters and a brother. When they didn't need that big house anymore, they moved to a smaller house on Freeman Street where they lived for the rest of their lives.

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

There were many changes and one is the larger number of people which caused more and more houses to be built. The biggest single change was when they built **Woodbridge Center**. At that time, I was in my '30s, my early '30s. They opened it in 1971. That used to be the clay pits and there was a mining company up there that mined the clay and they sold that clay to the bricks to the brick factory which was down at the end of (Pennval Road). There used to be another way in but that was Valentine Fire Brick Company. Valentine Fire Brick Company operated many, many years but they had a very bad fire in 1956, it burned the whole plant down. After that it was never really the same. But that was one large change-Woodbridge Center being built.....that's the biggest change I remember in Woodbridge

The other changes were the construction of the **flood control project around 1970, 1971**. That is when the Township bought the property that our lumber company stood on. Our family owned a lumber company on Rahway Avenue in Woodbridge called the **Woodbridge Lumber Company**. The Township purchased that which is now Parker Press Park because they had to tear down all the buildings to build a flood control project. The brook that comes down through Woodbridge Park was a little narrow thing about four feet wide but it had to be enlarged to what it is today to carry the rain runoff from the Woodbridge Center area because the ground used to absorb the water up there. But when they paved it all, we had this rush of water coming down the town. The park used to flood and flood the firehouse out-the old firehouse. Then they had to put the new park or the new brook in; they widened and deepened it the brook. That was a big change when they did that job. (Heard's Creek)

Over the years, I remember as a child, I was very young- seven or eight years old-I guess eight and nine years old, 1948/1949, 1950 when they built the Turnpike. They built the Turnpike right through the marshlands between Woodbridge proper and Sewaren. They took a lot of houses; they took houses down and moved a lot of houses. Back in those days, no one wasted things, no one tore down a house. They jacked it up and they put it on wheels and moved it to a new location. The house that is on the northeast corner of Barron Avenue and Freeman Street, it's a brick ranch that was moved due to the Turnpike. The house that is on the southwest corner of Elmwood Avenue and Green Street that was moved from the Turnpike widening and lots of other houses.....So that was a big change in town....Of course the larger and larger population.

Brenda Velasco: One thing that I just want to comment on. You mentioned that Valentine Brick Company. We still have the kiln on Pennval Road. It is no longer in use but it is one of the few in tact kilns though it is not in use and weeds are coming out of it but you go back along time... You know quite a bit.

Brenda Velasco: Parker Press. Do any of you recall who James Parker was? ...He had the first printing press. We are now going to be getting an operable printing press within

the next few weeks from the 1800s and someone is donating it to Woodbridge Township and it is going to be located and the Parker Press ...and it works. The last time it worked was in the 1960s; it's got the type, it's manual, so it will be great. I just wanted to tie it into what you were saying.

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

That is an interesting question. We will start with the Post Office. It is now at 60 Main Street. It used to be on the corner of Pearl Street and James. There is a building there now and that used to be the post office-imaging company if my memory serves me right. ...They tore down houses along Main Street and then moved it to where it is today. The original location on the corner of Pearl and James is where there used to be an old livery stable in the early 1900s. A livery and that is where the fire department used to get their horses from.

Brenda Velasco: Just explain what a livery stable is.

Todd Howell: A livery stable is where they keep horses for rent. And that is how the fire department used to run. They used to have a horse drawn apparatus prior to 1915. When they had an alarm, the guy would let the horses go and they would run around the corner themselves and the men would grab them, hook them up to the pumper and would drag it to the fire. I am not that old but I remember old timers telling me that story about the horse drawn. I have a roll call sheet at home that my grandfather filled out-I guess it was 1913 Or 1914- and he lists the names of the two horses that responded to that alarm. That is a big change and of course the firehouse itself. The firehouse you see today on the corner of Brook and School Street was built in 1968 and we moved into that building in December of 1968; December 21st they occupied it. The old firehouse stood right there and it was such a good location that the Board of Fire Commissioners decided to build a new firehouse there. They tore down the old building and they located the fire department for about a year and a half in the town garage. The town garage stood where Lowe's now stands. ...Lowe's Home Center that's where the Town garage was. They took a portion of it and used it for about a year and a half then moved into the new building. That was a major change. Also the most recent change is when they took down the old Townhall and built our new Townhall where it now stands on the corner of Berry and Main.

6. *What did you do for recreation?*

When I was growing up, I know it is going to be hard to realize this, but there was no Little League, no soccer league for the boys and girls. If you were involved in sports, you were involved in sports through the school. School had basketball teams, baseball teams. They had a football team of course but organized sports after hours that you are all used to didn't exist in the 1940s and the 1950s; it just wasn't around. So what did we do? We rode our bicycles, we played in the playgrounds. There was a lot of open land so you could run around in the fields. There was so much open land in Woodbridge in the 1940s that people could actually go hunting on some of it in Port Reading where there was nothing but fields. Those days are long gone...long gone today. We didn't have computers, computer games, we didn't have Atari, we didn't have Wii. We amused

ourselves with games; we played and had interests. For years because I lived in Sewaren and friends of ours lived on Cliff Road. They had a piece of property on the water; they had a place to build a dock. I had a boat, it was only about fourteen feet long but I amused myself in the summers with this boat. Boating was a part of my life when I was young. I enjoyed that, that was very nice in Sewaren... which is still there today. You can own a boat but you have to be a little richer.

Brenda Velasco: We still have some of the lowest rates for the marina rental.

Todd Howell: That's right.

Brenda Velasco: The Township...and it's a long waiting list so you are not the only one who enjoys boating

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

Focal point? Woodbridge at that time as it still is a small community. Today it's, it was always a bedroom community for New York. The railroad and the buses were available for people to take the train or bus to work in NYC or Newark. A lot of people worked in Newark, Elizabeth, or New York City.

There is an interesting story about the ...Pennsylvania Railroad(Woodbridge Proper)-at that time- which is now the Shoreline which runs right through our Township right through Woodbridge Proper.....It was built by the Pennsylvania Railroad and it was built through **Edgar Hill** and Ellis Edgar owned Edgar estate. At that time his estate ran all the way from Freeman Street all the way up to Rahway; it was a huge tract of property. The house that he lived in is still on Prospect Street. If you go up Ridgedale and make a left on Prospect, it is on the right hand side and has big tall windows. In fact, for many years Miss Hendrickson lived there; she was a guidance teacher in our school system. That was the Edgar Estate home. When the Pennsylvania Railroad wanted to build a railroad through Mr. Edgar's property- he worked in NYC and used to have to take a carriage to Rahway to get to New York City on the train-he was a stock broker and he had a seat on the Stock Exchange. So he sold the right of way to the Pennsylvania Railroad and he told them that as a stipulation they had to maintain in perpetuity- for ever- a railroad stop at Edgar. For many years there was a railroad station at the foot of Prospect Street next to the railroad; the train would stop there so Mr. Edgar could walk a few houses down to get on the train and go to New York. And they maintained that stop until well into the '60s and somehow or other they got out of that clause and they stopped stopping the train there. Now you either have to go to either Avenel or go to the Woodbridge Train Station. But that's how the stop got to be known as Edgar. There is still a walkway that goes over the railroad. You can go up this walkway and cross.

Brenda Velasco: That's in back of the high school or by the high school.

Todd Howell: It's on Chalet Drive on one side and Edgar Hill on the other. . The railroad station that was there burned down, it was destroyed by fire, probably thirty-five or forty years ago, a long time ago...

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

I liked living in Woodbridge because Woodbridge is still a small community; it's always been-not physically small but a small community of people. When you walked down the street in Woodbridge, people say: hi, how are you or good morning, Todd. I see people and say good morning so and so, how are you?

It's a friendly community; it's a community that's small enough where you know people. I don't feel like a stranger on the streets of New York City. I walk down the street in New York City and I don't know anybody but...

Brenda Velasco: Except this is the fifth largest community in the State of New Jersey

Todd Howell: And it's still "homey" as you are saying it's unique because it's homey I know people. Now my family and I, I lived here all my life and I still see a lot of people that have also lived here all their life, people that I went to high school with. Of course a lot of our class is gone, moved away and we have lost contact...But you would be surprised that the number of people who graduated in 1958 from the high school like I did that still live here in Woodbridge. And that I am still friendly with and know. That's what I like about Woodbridge and what's remarkable about it. I am not a stranger here.

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

Luckily I don't remember any riots in Woodbridge so we can cross that off our list. There has been accidents. I was eleven years old when they had the train wreck when the **train** called the Broker ran off the tracks on the end of Fulton Street. They were constructing at that time the New Jersey Turnpike and had a temporary wooden trestle. The train didn't slow down enough and it ran off the tracks and it killed eighty-four or eighty-five people. It still ranks as one of the worst train wrecks in the history of the United States. At that time I was as I say only eleven years old but I can remember the glow of the cutting torches in the night as they were cutting the cars apart to try and get these trapped passengers out of the train and also the people who had been killed. At that time they used the First Aid Squad which then was located on Brook Street right behind the firehouse as a morgue and that's where they took the people who were killed to be identified at a later time. That was really bad..., I remember that as a child.

Brenda Velasco: I know Charlie Kenny was instrumental and the LaPentas in getting a marker placed by that location.

Todd Howell: Yes, that's right where the Legion Place runs underneath the track there is a large bronze plaque or is it there or is it on Main Street, Brenda?

Brenda Velasco: I think it's by Legion Place..not Main Street...(The train wreck occurred in 1951, killing eighty-five people. The bronze plaque is located under the railroad trestle on Main Street. There also are bronze plaques located under this trestle and the Legion Place underpass for construction during the Depression.)

Todd Howell: There has been **fires**. There was one spectacular fire in 1983 or 1984 when Bob Kociolek was chief (1984). The old **Laredef Warehouse*** at the end of Fulton and Cutter's Dock Road caught fire on a windy day. Within a half hour this building that covered two to three acres burned right down flat to the ground. It took a week to cool it down and completely out. That was probably one of the largest structure fires that I ever remember. Luckily no one was hurt and our fire department used twenty-five fire companies to assist but luckily no one was hurt. The next worst fire I guess was in 1996, when Norman Leahy was the chief of the department (1996), lightning struck a fuel tank filled with three and a half million gallons of gasoline at **Shell/Motiva** facility; it caught fire and it took about three days.. by just letting it burn out. There was no real way to put it out. They let it burn down to where it was safe to put foam on it and then snuffed it out. That was another example where it was a rather spectacular fire but by the grace of

God no one was injured at all; no one killed or injured at all. So we consider that a good fire. No one got hurt.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

First of all I like where I live. It's a park area on a dead end street and it's nice and quiet. I like the town because Woodbridge is a safe place to live. We have what I consider stable taxes. I know a lot of people complain about taxes but they are a way of life. If you are going to have police and fire protection, garbage collection, schools that are good, you are going to pay taxes. I know people pay a heck of a lot more in other communities throughout the State that our friends of mine and I don't think they get anything near what we get here in Woodbridge. It's a clean community and a safe community. We have very good educational programs for our children and we have activities. It is very nice and heartening to sit here and look at these young people who are interested in the history of our town because it is very historic. It is one of the oldest communities in the State of New Jersey. I belong to the Presbyterian Church, the old White Church. That church was founded in 1675 so that will give you an idea on how long people have been here. 1675 was not long after Henry VIII died and this is a very old community and I still think it is a good place to live.

Brenda Velasco: Can I just interject that we were chartered in 1669 just before the First Presbyterian was founded and we are the oldest continuing Township in the State of New Jersey. We even beat out Perth Amboy so.....this is part of history

Todd Howell: History took place here. George Washington slept here in the Cross Keys Hotel. Many historic figures throughout history have been here in Woodbridge. I guess it was not too long ago recent that William Clinton, Bill Clinton, when he was president, visited Woodbridge High School and he spoke there. I like Woodbridge. It's a good place...good government, a good place to live.

Brenda Velasco: President Clinton had come to Woodbridge High School and the reason was the big campaign *To Kick Butts*-it meant stop smoking and was targeted for your high school students.

Glenn Lottman- senior year in high school

Brenda Velasco: Jennifer Crea was one of the speakers I think from the student body at that time but we have had a lot of things happen here..

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

No. Believe it or not I am the only Howell in my family left in Woodbridge. There was another family named Howell when I was in school, but they were no relation to us. There are no Turners left; just my wife and myself. My children all live in Boston, Atlanta or Somerville, New Jersey. My brother lives in Salisbury, Maryland. My sister lives in Brick Township. I am the last Howell in Woodbridge Township my wife and I, my wife, Kathryn.

Brenda Velasco: Then your family, Turner or Howell has lived in Woodbridge since the 1700s. So you are the last.

Todd Howell: We are the last.

Brenda Velasco: Unfortunately. ..Well I thank you for agreeing to the interview. You enlightened us a lot about the history of Woodbridge. Thank you again.



Brenda Velasco: Do any of you have any questions that you want to direct to Mr. Howell? Fire department.

Student: Why did you decide to do the interview?

Todd Howell: Because, first of all, I have some knowledge of history. I am not that old that I go back to the 1700s, but there are a lot of interesting things that have taken place in less than fifty years and I think this project is a great idea. I remember my grandfather telling me things and my grandfather came here in 1908. I only wish that I had written them down or he had told me more or we had recorded it because I think that it's important that we understand the history of the place that we live because we are a product of that history; those people who came before us and built this town left it for us to take care of and nurture, to leave it to our children. I only wish that I had had more time to question him and write things down so that's why I came here to give this information on a tape and to these young people who are interested. Maybe it will be preserved and part of it will be passed along. Maybe someone will take that tape out a hundred years from now and say gee, we never knew that about this or that... That is why I did it.

Brenda Velasco: You are our primary source...one of them. Go ahead, Louis.

Louis Polise: Over the years how have the gas prices changed?

Todd Howell: Well, I'll tell you. I'll tell you, young fellow what, that is a real good question because I've got a good memory. And I remember when I was in high school and I had a car. I used to buy gas from a fellow named Daschek. He had a gas station on Rahway Avenue by what is now the Mulberry Street Restaurant. That was a pizza parlor then. The gas station was on the other corner and I paid twenty-two cents a gallon for gas.

Student: Now it's \$4.00 a gallon.

Todd Howell: Now you get a tablespoon full for twenty-two cent. Yes, I remember that. What is it today-\$3.45.....3.53?

Students:.....discussing price of gas.

Todd Howell: Energy is a far greater part of our budgets than it was many, many years ago. Gas was cheap. Heating oil was sixteen cents when my father bought the house in Sewaren.

Brenda Velasco: Except we weren't making the salaries back then that we are making today... I know we paid twenty-five cents for one gallon when we were going to high school because we were cheap and we didn't have much money...

Student: Even with the salaries they get today, it's still not enough.

Todd Howell: Percentage wise it is a higher cost. Anybody else have any questions?

Brenda Velasco: If not, thank you for sharing your personal history.

*Laredef Warehouse Fire (Laredef is federal spelled backwards). Warehouse was renamed by new owner, Mr. Clare, after he purchased the complex from Federal Seaboard Terra Cotta. The fire that destroyed the entire complex in 1984 was commanded by Chief Robert Kociolek. At the time of the fire it was known as the D'Agostino Warehouse, having changed owners once more.

