

Alberta Ross

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, March 2005 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, April 2021
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Abstract: Alberta A. (Smith) Ross (1886-1981), the daughter of Frank B. Smith and Henrietta (Anderson) Smith, was born and raised in Metuchen. Her father was the town barber who owned and operated his own barbershop along Main Street until the 1930s. He also served as a volunteer fireman for the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company. Ms. Ross was one of five daughters who attended the Franklin Schoolhouse as a young girl. Her family lived in several places in Metuchen including places along Hillside Avenue, Main Street, Pearl Street, New Street, and East Walnut Street. In 1911, Ms. Ross married Elmer Ross, who was a shipping clerk for Johnson & Johnson, and they moved to New Brunswick. She is buried at Hillside Cemetery in Metuchen.

In this interview, Ms. Ross discusses her family, her father's business as a town barber, her early education in Metuchen, and meeting her husband and moving to New Brunswick. She talks extensively about her early childhood in Metuchen including her recollections of local families and playmates, fires, local businesses, harsh winters, and the trolley.

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P. Bruno: Today is March 8, 1978 and this is Paula Bruno and I'll be interviewing Mrs. Alberta Ross who was born and raised in Metuchen in 1886. Her father was Frank Smith, who owned and operated his own barbershop on Main Street. [recording paused]

I'd like to start by you telling me a little bit about your parents, where they were from, and how they settled in Metuchen.

A. Ross: Yes, I will. Well, my mother [Henrietta (Anderson) Smith] was from now England, someplace in England, and my father was born in New York in the United States. He was German and my mother was English.

P. Bruno: How did they meet?

A. Ross: They must have met in Brooklyn [New York]. That's all I know. I imagine he met her down in Brooklyn where the family lived after they come from the other side [Germany]. And when my mother came, her and her grandmother, her father and mother [Mary A. Anderson], they came to Albany [New York]. And then from Albany, they came to New York and that's where they met him and that's where they all settled.

- P. Bruno: And how did they come to settle in Metuchen?
- A. Ross: **I don't know; they just come. They were only about twenty years old when they came to Metuchen. I don't know if it was through friends or not. I couldn't say.**
- P. Bruno: And where did they first settle in Metuchen? Do you remember where they first lived when they came to town?
- A. Ross: **No. Oh yes, it was some place. Some woman had a boarding house I think up Hillside Avenue somewhere and they boarded there until they went housekeeping, I believe. That's all I know.**
- P. Bruno: And you were born and raised in Metuchen in 1886. Is that right?
- A. Ross: **Eighteen-hundred-eighty-six.**
- P. Bruno: And so where did your family live in Metuchen? Where did you grow up?
- A. Ross: **Well, we lived one time on Pearl Street in Metuchen and then we moved and lived on Main Street, Metuchen. And then again they moved down, then we moved to a place not far from Pearl [Street]. Now what street? [59] New Street. They lived down several places in Metuchen.**
- P. Bruno: And you had five sisters?
- A. Ross: **There's five girls in the family.**
- P. Bruno: So you had four sisters?
- A. Ross: **Four sisters.**
- P. Bruno: Could you tell me their names?
- A. Ross: **Well, the eldest girl died when she was a child. I guess that was May. Then there was Emily [Emily Louise Smith, born 1876], and then there was ten years and then I was born, Alberta [Alberta Smith, born 1886]. And then there was Edith [Edith M. Smith, born 1888] and then there was Retta [Henrietta F. Smith, born 1891]. There were five girls.**
- P. Bruno: And did you help your mother around the house with the chores?
- A. Ross: **Yes, yes, I did. I never worked anyplace.**
- P. Bruno: So let's talk a little bit about your father now. Now he owned and operated Frank Smith's Barbershop?
- A. Ross: **He owned the business and he rented it from the Robins, I guess. Old, ill people had that building, I guess.**
- P. Bruno: Was the barbershop in Robins Hall [at 401 Main Street]?

- A. Ross:** Downstairs. And then we'd come out where his place was, and then you used to go up the stairs to go up to the other part of Robins Hall where they used to have entertainments and where the Masonics had their lodge room in there for a while.
- P. Bruno: Did your father have any sort of training as a barber?
- A. Ross:** Well, he must have because he came to Metuchen and he opened it up soon afterwards. So I guess he learned it in Brooklyn, I guess, because he was born in Brooklyn. He wasn't born over the other side [Germany] so he must have worked in Brooklyn. [clears throat]
- P. Bruno: And do you remember going to the barbershop?
- A. Ross:** Used to go there a lot. [laughs]
- P. Bruno: What did you do when you went down?
- A. Ross:** Well, sometimes I'd minded if he had wanted to go home for a few minutes, I would. But I wouldn't do any work in the barbershop. Only sometimes I'd go in the back room to try to play pool by myself. [laughs]
- P. Bruno: There was a pool table in the back room!
- A. Ross:** Yes! And I used to amuse myself with that sometimes. [chuckles]
- P. Bruno: How much did a haircut cost in those days?
- A. Ross:** Well, it must have been a quarter. It must have been; I imagine it was.
- P. Bruno: That's really something. [coughing] And I was reading in the book that you have on the *Boyhood Days in Metuchen*¹, that when somebody was ill, your father used to go out and give them a haircut.
- A. Ross:** Oh, he would. Mama used to say, "Where you going now?" "Well, I'm going up to shave somebody" or "I'm going down to Edison to see him." Thomas Edison. He liked to go down there [to Menlo Park] and he used to go down [and] cut his hair, I think, too.
- P. Bruno: Thomas Edison's hair?
- A. Ross:** He was a great friend of Thomas Edison. He was always going someplace. You see him going down the road with his little satchel. And he was always doing something for somebody.
- P. Bruno: And he was also a volunteer fireman?
- A. Ross:** Yes.

¹ Local resident David Trumbull Marshall first wrote *Recollections of Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen* in 1929, and the second edition was published in 1930. The book covers his personal recollections of both Metuchen and Raritan Township from the late nineteenth century through to 1930

- P. Bruno: What company did he belong to?
- A. Ross: The Eagle. Did you see the picture in the book?**
- P. Bruno: Yes, I did.
- A. Ross: Yes, the Eagles.**
- P. Bruno: The Eagle Hook and Ladder [Company]. And you told me that you used to like to go and see fires when you were young?
- A. Ross: I did. I was crazy for fires when I was a kid. [laughs] I used to just love to go toward them! Sometimes I'd have a skinned knee, I'd fall down or something else, you know. But I just liked them.**
- P. Bruno: Can you remember any big fires?
- A. Ross: Well, I don't know. I bet there was a big fire when the Spear's place burnt down [at 56 Woodbridge Avenue].**
- P. Bruno: And how old were you then?
- A. Ross: Well, I must have been in my teens, a young girl.**
- P. Bruno: And was it a house or a farm?
- A. Ross: I didn't go all the way down. I guess it was the house.**
- P. Bruno: The house.
- A. Ross: Yes.**
- P. Bruno: Did a lot of people come out and see the fires?
- A. Ross: Oh, they do. [chuckles] Kids like to run for everything.**
- P. Bruno: What was Main Street like?
- A. Ross: Well, just those stores where the [Eagle Hook and Ladder] Fire Company was [at 398 Main Street]. And then next to that was the building where the Post Office was [at 396 Main Street], next to the firehouse on that side of the street where the fire engines were in Metuchen.**
- P. Bruno: Now you're talking about Main Street, right?
- A. Ross: Yes. And on this side, I remember the Tausig's where they had a store. Tausig's and then came the bakery, then came Kramer's Department Store [at 441 Main Street].**
- P. Bruno: And you mentioned Clarkson's Grocery Store [at 507 Middlesex Avenue]. You used to like to go there?

- A. Ross:** Yes. That used to be on the other side of the street, yeah.
- P. Bruno: Did you play a lot when you were little?
- A. Ross:** A little, quite a bit. There were quite a few people I knew. I knew the Van Sickles. Let's see, Van Sickle lived on [603] Middlesex Avenue and I think the house is there, yeah, right near where you turn to go down now where the undertaker's place is. Their house [is] there. They were relation, the Van Sickles: Hattie Van Sickle [Harriet Van Sickle] and Hannah Bennett. They were sisters to my mother-in-law, Mrs. [Laura] Ross. They lived in Metuchen, but they weren't born in Metuchen. They came there when their grandparents came.
- P. Bruno: Was your husband [Elmer Ross] a Metuchen resident?
- A. Ross:** No, no.
- P. Bruno: Where was he from?
- A. Ross:** No, he was [from] East Millstone.
- P. Bruno: How did you meet?
- A. Ross:** [laughs] Well, we met when we went to—I was there to an exercise at the [First] Presbyterian Church, commencement exercise. And he was there with his mother and father [Daniel Ross] and them. I think one of his cousins graduated from school. And that's how we met, in the Presbyterian Church.
- P. Bruno: In Metuchen.
- A. Ross:** Yeah, in Metuchen after that.
- P. Bruno: So did you graduate from the Franklin School?
- A. Ross:** No, it was the Middlesex School.
- P. Bruno: The Middlesex School?
- A. Ross:** Well, it's the Franklin School now. What did they call the old ones? Do they call that Franklin? I don't forget.
- P. Bruno: I don't really know. Some people remember the—
- A. Ross:** I don't know, but it was an old schoolhouse. I don't know.
- P. Bruno: There was also the Edgar School.
- A. Ross:** No, I didn't go to the Edgar School. I went where the new schoolhouse was. That's where I used to go to school, where the old building was.
- P. Bruno: I think that was still the Franklin School. They still called it that. Do you remember some of your classmates?

- A. Ross:** No, I think I've forgot some of them. [laughs]
- P. Bruno: Did you like growing up in Metuchen?
- A. Ross:** I didn't mind it. We got used to the ways and things, and got used to the way we had to live. Used to have to carry the water in when you wanted and everything else.
- P. Bruno: Did you have a well outside your house?
- A. Ross:** Yes, we had a pump. Didn't have any improvements then.
- P. Bruno: No, I guess not.
- A. Ross:** [chuckles] We had lots of snow though!
- P. Bruno: Lots of snow?
- A. Ross:** Yeah, I was about two years old when that other blizzard was 1888.
- P. Bruno: Oh, do you remember the Blizzard of [18]88?
- A. Ross:** I remember the snow! I used to go to the store with my mother. Sometimes she'd be coming around the corner looking for me, I fell down so many times. You'd be go snow up to here, you know.
- P. Bruno: What do you think about this winter?
- A. Ross:** I don't like it either! [laughs] If you don't have to go out in it, but when we were kids, we had to go out in it.
- P. Bruno: Did you go ice skating?
- A. Ross:** Yes, Thomas Pond.
- P. Bruno: And tobogganing?
- A. Ross:** Down Daniels Hill.
- P. Bruno: Yes, I think just about everybody in Metuchen went.
- A. Ross:** Yeah, I guess they did. Used to go up the hill, way down it. And that pond was quite big. Thomas Pond was quite good. That was off Spring Street down there then. Used to go skating there, everybody, all the kids. I don't think there is anybody young in Metuchen now, any young people that I know.
- P. Bruno: That go skating there?
- A. Ross:** Yeah, I mean left in Metuchen when we were there. The Robinses are all gone, and now the Litterst girls are gone. So many of them left. The Kramers, they

were all gone; the Tausigs are all gone. Except you say Helen Kramer lives in New Brunswick?

P. Bruno: Yes.

A. Ross: Did she get married again?

P. Bruno: Her last name is Heksch, H-e-k-s-c-h or something.

A. Ross: Well, she's quite old too.

P. Bruno: Yes.

A. Ross: She's the youngest one, Helen. She was the youngest one and then Bertha Kramer, she was quite old too. She died, I think, last year or a couple years ago in Roosevelt Hospital.

P. Bruno: So who were some of your playmates?

A. Ross: Oh, Pearl Grimstead and all of them.

P. Bruno: Now Pearl Grimstead, she was a sister of the Grimstead brothers?

A. Ross: Yes. She was [James] Lloyd Grimstead's sister.

P. Bruno: Lloyd Grimstead's sister?

A. Ross: There were just the two of them then.

P. Bruno: Oh, I see.

A. Ross: Yes, Pearl and Lloyd. And I guess the house is still on [576] Middlesex Avenue, right near the schoolhouse.

P. Bruno: Yes, I think so.

A. Ross: You say he died? Lloyd Grimstead?

P. Bruno: He died I guess about two years ago [in 1976].

A. Ross: Yes. And you say Paul Fenton lives in Metuchen?

P. Bruno: Yes, Mr. Fenton is still in Metuchen.

A. Ross: I remember him when he was like that small and his father married us, Paul Fenton's father [Rev. John Fieldhouse Fenton].

P. Bruno: You told me last time I was here that Pearl Grimstead and you used to go to the circus.

A. Ross: Yes, used go to the circus. That's where they had them; that's where they used to play ball over there.

- P. Bruno: The circus? Where was the circus at?
- A. Ross: In that big place right across the street [Middlesex Avenue] from the schoolhouse, used to be a big lot there [between Lake Avenue and Pearl Street]. And now the A&P [The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company] I think is in that lot [at 45 Pearl Street].**
- P. Bruno: Uh-huh. And the circus used to come to town every year?
- A. Ross: Pretty near every year. And that's where they used to play ball and have their circuses.**
- P. Bruno: Did you like the circus?
- A. Ross: Yes, in a way. [laughs] They are not as daring now, worse than they were. But I don't know. Streets have changed. I don't think there are any of the Hahm boys living in Metuchen anymore, is there?**
- P. Bruno: Oh, I don't know.
- A. Ross: They used to have a drug store there on [412] Main Street. No, I don't think they are.**
- P. Bruno: So what else can you tell me about Metuchen as a town?
- A. Ross: I don't know.**
- P. Bruno: What did you think of the people? Were the people friendly?
- A. Ross: Yes, they seemed to be friendly. I guess the mothers and them used to have the parties and things. Mama always took us to it. She'd never leave us home.**
- P. Bruno: Oh, parties that your parents went to?
- A. Ross: You know go to different houses. But she always took us children.**
- P. Bruno: And you must have played with the other children when you got there?
- A. Ross: Yes, [unclear] with all of them; the Litterst girl and Carman, Mae Carman [Mary E. Carman]. Are any Carmans in Metuchen now?**
- P. Bruno: Well, there's a Major Carman.
- A. Ross: Who?**
- P. Bruno: Major Carman, Charles Carman?
- A. Ross: Yes.**
- P. Bruno: He still lives in Metuchen.
- A. Ross: And the Pecks?**

P. Bruno: Yes, yes.

A. Ross: Some of them yet?

P. Bruno: Um-hm.

A. Ross: Well, one of them married, I think, a Burroughs girl. I think it was Fred². I don't know if Fred Peck or not. I remember them.

P. Bruno: What do you remember about the Grimsteads?

A. Ross: Well, I used to go there, and Pearl and I, we'd go out and we'd play. And Mrs. [Amanda (Edgar)] Grimstead was very nice, very nice.

P. Bruno: How about Mr. [James Augustus] Grimstead?

A. Ross: Well, he was nice too. There's [unclear] and the Bennetts. The Van Sickles lived there and the Van Siclens—are two different ones, families with different relations.

P. Bruno: Okay, well thank you very much.

A. Ross: We all went to school. I remember one time there when we had an awful snowstorm right now next door to us when we lived on Pearl Street, and Mabel Opelt of Metuchen, she had a kindergarten for girls. And that snowstorm was so bad that one of the Lehlein boys—Chrissie Lehlein [Christina Lehlein], they're all dead too, she was small—no, it was Edna, the youngest one, Edna. And the brother used to come and carry my sister, Retta, and her and Edna over there to the kindergarten [unclear] right next door to us. But there was so much snow [unclear], you can't take one of them back and come back and take the other one back.

P. Bruno: It was a special kindergarten just for girls?

A. Ross: For children, yes, girls. That was next door to us when we lived on place [Pearl Street].

P. Bruno: Did you like school?

A. Ross: Oh, not too much. I remember Anderson around the corner on Main Street, and I think it was that side street down, I remember when the saloon was there. And I remember the Power boys when they were small. I think they kept a hardware store³, I think. And there were the Dempseys, they kept a delivery place in Metuchen. I think they're all gone of them too.

P. Bruno: Who owned the saloon?

² Fredrick Clarkson Peck married Mary E. Carman.

³ The Power family owned a harness store at 421 Main Street in the early twentieth century.

A. Ross: Well, there was one party [that] had the saloon by the name of Hulsizer⁴, and then there was one down farther by the name of Beckers⁵; Beckers.

P. Bruno: Somebody also mentioned the McGuinnesses.

A. Ross: McKenzies?

P. Bruno: McGuinness.

A. Ross: Oh, McGuinness. Yes, they had a saloon there too [at 417-419 Main Street]. And they had a saloon there. Have they taken it all down?

P. Bruno: Yes, I think it is.

A. Ross: I remember when I was a girl, I was coming from Main Street down Pearl Street and the Beckers had a saloon on Main Street and they had children. And they had, I think, three little children and they would come to our house on Pearl Street every morning after they had their breakfast. And one day I was coming down from—I think, I don't know, I'd been to the store up on Main Street and coming down, and a great big beer truck—you know they had those big horses?

P. Bruno: Yes.

A. Ross: Come down the street wrong and turned in Beckers' driveway and killed two of the children. I can remember that; I can see it now! Coming down and seeing those horses because I went and run in somebody's yard. And you know that Mrs. Becker, they couldn't do anything with her. She screamed and she hollered and yelled. Killed them right out there. There's no [unclear] like that. I remember that in my day. I can see that beer truck coming racing down Pearl Street and just turned right in the yard, and see, they were in the yard playing, the children were—ran over two of them.

P. Bruno: Do you remember a Chinese laundry on Main Street?

A. Ross: Oh, I don't know just where it was.

P. Bruno: I was just wondering if you remembered.

A. Ross: I don't know who had a Chinese laundry. I remember Perry's Candy Store.

P. Bruno: Is that the store that had the penny candy?

A. Ross: Yes, next door to—pretty next door to the Robins Hall [at 405 Main Street]. Yeah, they were the Perrys, had the candy store and then came the other stores on down.

Do you remember Dr. [Clarence] Hofer when he was in Metuchen?

⁴ According to city directories, Sidney Hulsizer owned the Albany Hotel along Main Street during the late 1890s.

⁵ According to city directories, Rudolph Becker owned the Brunswick Hotel along Main Street during the late 1890s and early 1900s.

- P. Bruno: Dr. Hofer? I guess the doctors made house calls in those days?
- A. Ross: **Yes, they made house calls then. You didn't have to go to the office so much. Then there was a Dr. [Edward B.] Dana and Dr. [Alonzo Clark] Hunt and Dr. [William] McKenzie. I think there are some of the McKenzies in Metuchen yet.**
- P. Bruno: There may be.
- A. Ross: **I think they kept around. Well, I guess there isn't anybody much more that I know, except me, hanging on. [laughs]**
- P. Bruno: So when you were growing up, was Main Street a dirt road or—?
- A. Ross: **Well, I remember when we were kids when they were putting the trolley in.**
- P. Bruno: You can remember when they were putting the trolley in?
- A. Ross: **Two or three of us kids walked on those things all the way up to a place there [unclear] to Benner's Corner [near Christol Street] when they were putting those ties down. When the men were not working, we kids would walk on those things all the way up. I remember that going all through Main Street. I remember Main Street when they were putting in the trolley lanes.**
- P. Bruno: Did you like riding the trolley?
- A. Ross: **I didn't mind it. [laughs] But then you come right through Main Street.**
- P. Bruno: I suppose that was big news when they were putting the trolley in.
- A. Ross: **Yes. It went up to a place we used to call Benner's Corner. It's where you turned—you go up Main Street, all the way up Main Street, and you turn this way, and that was Benner's Corner. Benners lived there [at 55 Christol Street], then you would turn that way, that's where you go up to Plainfield, towards Plainfield. But the houses are there yet. I saw them there the other day when I went through with my niece, turned that way. That's at Benner's [Corner], that house is there yet.**
- P. Bruno: What do you think of the town today when you drive through it?
- A. Ross: **Huh?**
- P. Bruno: What do you think of Metuchen today?
- A. Ross: **Well, it looks better.**
- P. Bruno: It looks better?
- A. Ross: **I didn't notice—and it improved so much with that—when I lived in New Brunswick, I didn't come to Metuchen much. I don't think I hardly ever came to Metuchen.**
- P. Bruno: That's right, after you were married you lived in New Brunswick.

A. Ross: I lived in Metuchen about two years, I guess. And then I went to New Brunswick and I lived there ever since. Lived in New Brunswick I guess over sixty some odd years.

P. Bruno: So you've noticed all the changes on Main Street.

A. Ross: [chuckles] Said I wouldn't know anybody over there if I went over.

P. Bruno: It's grown a lot, population wise.

A. Ross: Yes, yes.

Post Office is different and that nice building that Dr. [Herman] Gross had an office [at 344 Main Street] down there, this side of the hill. We used to live in a little house across the way from him.

P. Bruno: On Main Street?

A. Ross: Yeah.

P. Bruno: So you didn't live too far from your father's barbershop then?

A. Ross: No, we didn't. Never did. Well, we were always doing something or going someplace another. [laughs]

P. Bruno: Did you have an active life?

A. Ross: Oh, a little bit. But not as wild as they have here nowadays. Go with one fellow, go with another fellow. I don't think I went with anybody until I met Elmer [husband].

P. Bruno: Were the summers hot?

A. Ross: I don't think they were in my day. I don't think they were.

P. Bruno: And how did you pass your time in the summertime?

A. Ross: Oh, just getting into mischief, I guess, like the other kids did. [laughs]

P. Bruno: What kind of mischief did you get into?

A. Ross: Not too much, I guess.

P. Bruno: Well, what was considered mischief? Like what were some of the bad things that kids did?

A. Ross: We didn't do any bad things, I guess; not what the kids do today. Didn't break up the windows and screws and things. Well, there weren't so many colored people around then. It's terrible what they are doing to the schools.

P. Bruno: Yes.

A. Ross: Where do you live?

P. Bruno: I live in New Brunswick.

A. Ross: Do you? Whereabouts?

P. Bruno: Off of Livingston Avenue on Fulton Street.

A. Ross: Yeah. Well, New Brunswick used to be a nice place, but now it isn't.

P. Bruno: Parts of it are still nice.

A. Ross: Huh?

P. Bruno: I said parts of New Brunswick are still nice.

A. Ross: Yes, it's the downtown.

P. Bruno: Yes. Oh, that's really a mess.

A. Ross: Used to enjoy going downtown every day for a walk and looking around and coming home. I lived there a good many years, about sixty. Well, I celebrated my twenty-fifth and I celebrated my fiftieth wedding anniversary. And then two years after we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary, Mr. Ross died; two years afterwards. So I lived in New Brunswick over sixty some odd years until I come here, and it's only been about a little over a year since I lived here.

P. Bruno: Do you remember any big events in Metuchen?

A. Ross: No, I don't seem to.

P. Bruno: Fourth of July parades?

A. Ross: We didn't seem to have many of those things in my day.

P. Bruno: No?

A. Ross: No, not like they do nowadays.

P. Bruno: So it was relatively peaceful then?

A. Ross: Yes. [laughs] I imagine it's wilder now maybe. I guess with all the colored people and foreigners live over there too, same as New Brunswick. You can't go out at night in New Brunswick unless you get knocked down or something. It's awful hard.

What are they going to do with that [the tape]?

P. Bruno: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Ross. I think I'll turn off the tape now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]