

Interviewee: Eleanor Bloomfield
Interviewer: Paula Bruno
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Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

P. Bruno: Today is July 20, 1978 and this is Paula Bruno interviewing Eleanor Bloomfield, a one-time resident of Metuchen and who is now living in Newark, New Jersey.

I'd like to start by asking you to tell me a little bit about your ancestors and when they first came to settle in this area.

E. Bloomfield: My ancestors in this area came many, many years back. The original Bloomfields of New Jersey received a grant of land from Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret, and I was brought up on the very land that they received. It was about two and a half miles from Metuchen and was a very ideal location in some respects. However I feel that Metuchen has been and was my home since I was in Metuchen practically every day all day. I went home to sleep. This could be explained by the fact that I went to school in Metuchen always. Miss Mason on Woodbridge Avenue conducted a kindergarten. And that was my first sight of the school. I think I was three years old, possibly nearer to four. There were a number of Metuchen people there. I can't remember all of the names, but I do remember Isabelle Rawlins, Mildred Clarkson and Joyce Thompson were students, or rather kindergartners, perhaps I should say. I think we did a good deal of building with blocks and constructing with sticks, and happy was the day when they brought in some books. The next year Miss Mason did not conduct the school. It moved to rooms near the Kramer Department Store. It was conducted by a Miss Grace Martin and Miss Lily Campbell, a daughter of Alexander Campbell of Metuchen. Here there were five grades and I met a number of my very good friends, even to this day: Anna S. Mays was one and Anna Kriehall was another. Charlotte Hebride with whom I correspond regularly was a third. And many more, some of whose names slip my mind at the moment. Then my transfer was to Metuchen schools for which I cannot say enough. Metuchen High School was the most perfect training, I think, for future college or higher education of any type. The faculty members were all intelligent, carefully selected, personable, so interested. This was probably because Mr. Thomas G. Van Kirk, the principal, was so keen to have every one of us realize his or her potential. He spent a great deal of time thinking what teacher would be the best for the school, and I think he always managed to get the best. I cannot say enough in praise of Metuchen High. It might be interesting to know that while I was there we had a literary magazine called *School Light*, which I don't think is in existence now. Also while I was there, the first school annual, *The Blue Letter*, rather a feeble attempt when you compare it with the annuals of today, was

produced. That must have been around 1922, and I think there has been an annual ever since.

P. Bruno: Did you work on the literary magazine?

E. Bloomfield: Oh yes, I was the class editor and also wrote little bits of poems and occasionally a bit of prose. We were rather a group of eager beavers; most of my friends did the same but we found it very interesting, very fascinating in every respect.

P. Bruno: When did you graduate from Franklin School?

E. Bloomfield: From Metuchen High School I graduated in 1921.

P. Bruno: Then did you go to college afterward?

E. Bloomfield: Then I went to Trenton Normal School and then over to New York University where I got my degree. I began my work in the Newark school system and I really have never been in any other until my retirement a few years ago.

P. Bruno: You were an English teacher?

E. Bloomfield: I taught English. For a brief time I taught English and history. I had two majors. That was in junior high. Then, when I transferred to senior high, I taught English. And rather unexpectedly was asked to be counselor for two periods a day and teach English, which I did. Within a few years I took the examination for department head and was a very fortunate person in that very few women ever aspired to a position of that type. So I feel that I was fortunate in my placement, and right in my own school, which I feel helped.

P. Bruno: I think maybe we should get back to Metuchen. Did you want to talk about the Service Club for men?

E. Bloomfield: You may be interested to know that while I was in high school we had a Service Club. It was located on Amboy Avenue, near Main Street, formerly the home of Howard Campbell whose children many of you must know - Theodore, Irving, Irene, Louella. The Club I believe was open every night, but there was a dance once a week. These dances, as well as the privilege of going in – reading, writing and so forth – were presided over by one of the organizations in town. So of course when dance night came, the parents in charge saw that their daughters were there and their daughter's friends. Everything was very nicely run. The boys seemed to enjoy it so much, and the girls had a great dignity, and yet they enjoyed every minute of it.

I think I might add in that respect that there was a very large dance given after the World War I was over in Metuchen High School auditorium. We had, I think, Miss Krempski, who had one of the

dancing classes and I'll speak of them later, who conducted them for the wounded servicemen at the Menlo Park Rehabilitation Center. That was a tremendous affair. The men were brought in by buses and you would just feel they had had no pleasure really, for ages. It was a privilege to be there. My parents said the same thing; that they just couldn't imagine having a better time.

I did mention the dancing classes. I think my first dancing class was when I was about six, in the afternoon at the Metuchen Club, which was located then on Middlesex Avenue, conducted by a Miss Edwards. I seem to remember an accordion-pleated skirt. We had to come in and curtsy very, very formally. The next dancing class, that I recall, was conducted by Miss Edith Preehard in her home on Amboy Avenue. That, too, was in the afternoon, and all the people I knew were there, many of whose names I won't remember. But I know that Dolly Prickett Buchanan and Alice, the Mays, the Schenks and many, many more enjoyed many happy afternoons learning to do the "lulufada".

P. Bruno: What was that?

E. Bloomfield: The "lulufada" was dance somewhat like the ones you see today where you have a partner, but you hardly know it. You are in lines and you go down and back and pass your partner and give him a little bow.

P. Bruno: Sounds like you had a lot of fun.

E. Bloomfield: We had a lot of fun, but I'm afraid I couldn't demonstrate the "lulufada" now. Later Miss Krempski had a dancing class in the evening at the Metuchen Club, and that was rather a big thing. Just about everybody went to that class.

Later we had private lessons from a Mrs. Tunis, who had been a student of Irene and Vernon Castle. Her husband, occasionally if he were home, would come and help with the private students. What we learned from Mrs. Tunis was utterly tremendous. I'm fascinated, because they had all the charts that were used by Vernon and Irene Castle, and they were such skilled experts that we could dance with them with perfect, well, abandon practically, and feel that we were having the time of our lives and then practice what we learned later at some social event.

P. Bruno: Were your family members of the Metuchen Club?

E. Bloomfield: My mother and father belonged to the Metuchen Club. As I think of it, I think that probably most of my friends' parents belonged. It was quite a thing. I know I can remember my mother and father dressed up and going out to a big card party or an affair of some kind. It seems strange that Metuchen could manage without the Metuchen Club.

Quite the reverse of clubs, I'd like to mention if I may the shuttle. There was a little trolley that ran the length of Main Street, beginning up near Dolly Prickett Buchanan's home on Clive Street and running down into South Metuchen to the very end of Main Street. At Main Street and Amboy Avenue it, of course, connected with the main line trolley from New Brunswick to Perth Amboy. I think the big thing about the shuttle was Gene O'Hara, it's genial motorman. He would do anything for anybody. I believe he would put on a bottle of milk if he were asked to pick it up and somebody handed it to him and hand it out as he went along. Rain or shine, snow or fair, the shuttle ran. When the shuttle was taken off, I think Metuchen lost something.

Would you be interested in hearing about the Edison Outing Club?

P. Bruno: Sure.

E. Bloomfield: Well, Trumbull Marshall who lived in Metuchen and is one of its notable past citizens, was employed by the Edison Laboratories, as most people know, and very interested in lighting. Mr. Marshall organized the Edison Outing Club. Once a year the entire club would come down to the woodland owned by my grandfather, which was behind the Grandview tract of land, now well built up. They had a chicken roast, which would last quite far into the evening and a very happy time was had by all. And they always said the chickens tasted better there than they could ever taste anywhere else. One other thing about Mr. Marshall that you might be interested in hearing is, my grandfather had a huge boulder moved to the highest point of the Grandview tract. It was engraved with Trumbull Marshall's name and his achievements and so forth. Quite a ceremony was held; there were a great many people there with speakers and songs and so forth. Suddenly, after I was teaching, I came home one day and was sort of wandering around and the place was building up then and I said, "Where is the Trumbull Marshall Monument?" Well nobody seemed to know. We couldn't locate it anywhere. Years later, Mabel Dunham Smith, also a descendent of an old family, said that someone had told her who lived on the Grandview tract that they had bought a piece of land with a huge boulder and they were unable to move it. They just couldn't get it moved. And so they built their house around it. So that is where the monument is now. Now that was a slip-up on my grandfather's part, because he had intended to leave the monument and the land around it to Raritan Township, which is now Edison, for a little park commemorating the wonderful things that Trumbull Marshall had done in the line of science.

P. Bruno: Do you know owns the house now?

E. Bloomfield: No, I don't and I don't think she knew who the owner was but she was with a group and they were talking and this women told this

experience and later she asked some of her friends and they said they didn't know who it was.

Now in mind with that which was at the Grandview Height, I might mention that St. Peter's cadets from Perth Amboy always camped every summer in the woodland, not too far from where the chicken roasts were held. You could locate the spot, more or less, by the old tanks, water tanks, which I think must surely still be there. Under the leadership of Mr. Mulcahy they certainly had a wonderful time and learned so much about nature and so much about camping. Every year they came down and serenaded my grandmother, finally being invited right into the house where she played the piano and they all sang. Refreshments were served.

Going over things that happened, I wondered if you would like to hear about the Morgan explosion?

P. Bruno: Yes.

E. Bloomfield: This was probably the most exciting, well horrible experience that any of us ever had. Coinciding with the Morgan explosion was the awful epidemic of Spanish influenza, which had taken so many, many lives. There was hardly a home that didn't have from one to five people ill. In my own home we had three, one recovered, two ill and one hospitalized. My grandfather Mundy, who lived on Amboy Avenue between Home Street and Main Street, was also ill. He heard this terrible blast in the early evening on a fall night. It must have been around about 1920 I think. The blast was so terrific that the glass went right out of a number of windows right then. In about eight minutes there was another and they continued through the night. My father got in the car and drove down to find out where it was and what was happening. We found it was at Morgan's where there was a great deal of ammunition stored. They said it looked very serious, but they thought that they had gotten it under control, and so they had come home. But they were wrong, it wasn't under control and we were just simply frightened to death when, about two o'clock in the morning, there was such a blast when the rest of the blasts, which hadn't gone, went. We went out of the house as fast as we could go, bringing our ill people out on cots or anything we could find that was light enough to carry.

P. Bruno: How far was your home from the Morgan plant?

E. Bloomfield: Well we were – this is just a guess – I imagine it would be about ten miles and of course we were two miles from Metuchen. Metuchen was almost as close as we were, as the crow would fly. At any rate, in the morning word went through from Camp Raritan – later called the Raritan Arsenal - that Metuchen would certainly be devastated, and everybody should leave. Well, since so many people had people home who were ill, the answer is very few people left. Unfortunately, or rather very fortunately, a plane went over and

dropped an explosive on a dam, breaking the dam and flooding the magazines. The horrible explosion that they expected never took place. I think that is something that upset people. I've heard of people who were shell shocked from it; of falling and not knowing why and the doctors had diagnosed it as shell shock.

P. Bruno: From the Morgan explosion?

E. Bloomfield: Yes, the Morgan explosion. It was one of the most horrifying things I have ever experienced.

P. Bruno: How old were you when that happened?

E. Bloomfield: Let's see, I was in high school, I think a junior if I'm right about the date of 1920. I have a question mark after it.

P. Bruno: How about Jack Collins' private museum?

E. Bloomfield: Oh, yes. Probably no one knows about that. Jack Collins was a very interesting young man who was a teller in Metuchen National Bank. He had a large home on Middlesex Avenue in the vicinity of Mrs. Corbin's home. Near it he built a huge – I suppose it was constructed of cement, I'm not sure - building, which was to house a museum. And he single-handed went out and collected things of historical interest for this museum and it was utterly fascinating. I would have known nothing about it, really, except that one day I saw him downtown and he said, "Why don't you bring one of your classes out to my museum?"

I said, "Oh, I'd be so afraid something might vanish. I couldn't watch them so carefully and there wouldn't be others to help me. But I'll do it if I can find another teacher to come with me, since you do insist." So we chartered buses and came out and I brought my best class and we had a wonderful visit. We saw the most interesting things, and it just broke me up when I heard that the museum was closed and I think it's been torn down.

P. Bruno: Do you remember some of the items that he had. Did he specialize in one area of art that he collected?

E. Bloomfield: He was interested in New Jersey history, although all history. And I remember he had quite a number of things of Indian background; arrowheads and also a Revolutionary cannon ball and many different artifacts that were intriguing for the youngsters and intriguing for me.

P. Bruno: Did he collect these on his own?

E. Bloomfield: I think he did. I don't think he had a scout going out, but I suppose people who knew him well, when they saw things that he would like,

would either get it and bring them to him or else tell him where he could get it. People can be very helpful to one another.

One person I would like to mention is, if you'd be interested, Mary Wilkins Freeman? Well, Mary Wilkins Freeman and I met at a tea party. I was about maybe ten, possibly younger. She was a middle-aged writer. She had come to our house for tea and as a special favor I was allowed to pass her a cupcake. I took a good look at her and I was baffled because I had bobbed hair and wore bangs and my mother told me that all nice little girls wore bangs. Especially she emphasized this because I wasn't too keen about the idea. When I saw Mary Wilkins Freeman sitting there with bangs I thought, "Well, is she a little girl or a grown woman", which makes me think I must have been nearer six when I passed the cupcakes. So I went back and I whispered to my mother, "Is she a little girl or is she a grown woman?" My mother said, "Why do you ask?" I said, "Because she has bangs." It delighted Mary Wilkins Freeman so that I was her friend forever more. When I graduated, she gave me a beautiful pin to hold a corsage, and wrote, "May you have many bouquets of life" which I thought was a very, very sweet sentiment.

I'd like to mention *The Debtor*. Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote a novel, which some people don't know; it's called *The Debtor*. It supposedly has a background people who lived in Metuchen. Now my mother was able to place a number of them and I at this point am not able to remember who, except that one of the most interesting characters was named Cavalho and lived on the Plainfield Road. They didn't live there long, only a few years. They had a large home on the Plainfield Road. But it is a fascinating book and I hope people will read it and I know I'm going to re-read it.

P. Bruno: Some of the characters were representative of people in Metuchen?

E. Bloomfield: My mother said they had it all worked out; that they knew who everybody was. Of course, I suppose that would be omitted, but I think that was the situation. My mother was very friendly with a Mrs. Brooks who was mother of Mrs. Dinwiddie.

P. Bruno: I read part of her book.

E. Bloomfield: She wrote a book, *Memories of 80 Years*.

P. Bruno: There was another one. *A Grandmother's Diary* but we weren't able to locate that.

E. Bloomfield: That I haven't heard about, but I do have *Memories of 80 Years*, and I know that she was very devoted to her son-in-law because he was so very kind to her. I also remember in one of the private schools, the one conducted by Miss Martin and Miss Lily Campbell, we went out to the Dinwiddie farm so we would know what farm life was like,

and we each came home with an egg, which I thought was rather cute.

P. Bruno: Just getting back to Mary Wilkins Freeman - was your mother friends with her?

E. Bloomfield: Oh, very friendly. All of the family was friendly. Her husband had some relatives that lived on Route 27, up where the bridge goes into Route 27, near the Ford plant, before you come to the Ford plant. There were three sisters: Sally, Gussie and Jane. Jane was the oldest. The family was very friendly with them and there was a relationship between them; I'm not sure how close, it may have been close. And Dr. Freeman was the husband of Mary Wilkins Freeman.

I suppose that Mrs. Buchanan spoke about the Volkmar Pottery?

P. Bruno: Just a little bit.

E. Bloomfield: Yes, well I recall going to there many times with my family.

P. Bruno: Do you have any pieces?

E. Bloomfield: Yes I do. I have quite a number of odd pieces which I treasure.

P. Bruno: Well I can't think of any more questions to ask you. I'd like to thank you so much for coming and for sharing your memories of Metuchen with us.

E. Bloomfield: It's been a real pleasure to think about Metuchen. I hope someday I may be able to move back. All I want is an elevator apartment. If they would build a nice elevator apartment house, I would get an apartment there.