

Interviewee: Major Charles Carman
Interviewer: Ruth Terwilliger
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Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

R.Terwilliger: My name is Ruth Terwilliger and I am a member of the Metuchen Historical Commission. We are a newly formed commission with each member appointed by our mayor, Donald Wernik on May 21, 1973. Our purpose as a commission is to be an instrument for achieving the collection of historical facts and the preserving of historical sites in the borough of Metuchen. I would like at this time to introduce other members of our commission:

Mr. Martin Jessen, who is our Chairman, Mr. Frank Urich, Raymond Dwiggin, Mrs. Shirley Trent, Mr. William McDuffy and Mr. Charles Carman.

Major Carman is one of our oldest members. Mr. Carman has lived in Metuchen Edison area all of his life and he has lived an extremely interesting life. I thought it was so rich in historical value that we, as a commission, encouraged Major Carman to share some of his background with us on this tape. Today is December 29, 1973 and Major Carman and I, Ruth Terwilliger, are sitting in the living room of the house that Major Carman built for he and his wife some 70 years ago here on Linden Avenue in Metuchen.

R.Terwilliger: Mr. Carman, where did you ancestors come from in Europe?

Major Carman: On my father's side, England; and my mother's side, she was an Osborn, her father came from England and her mother's family originally came from Holland. It was a very old family. They have been in this country – well they landed in 1631, the father's did, in Roxbury, which is now part of Boston. They lived there for few years and later they moved, several members of the family moved to Hempstead, Long Island. There are still a great many Carmans living in and around Hempstead.

R.Terwilliger: When did they come to New Jersey then?

Major Carman: That I don't know exactly but it was in the 1600's as near as I can figure out. Some of them settled in the southern part of Jersey,

R.Terwilliger: This is down Cape May?

Major Carman: Around Cape May, yes.

R.Terwilliger: This is interesting, Mr. Carman, and how did you ever end up in Menlo Park then? Is that where you were born, in Menlo Park?

Major Carman: I was born in Menlo Park. I don't know just how they came there. My grandmother on my father's side was an Ayers and the Ayers' have a home on the Plainfield Road near Oak Tree. He had over 400 acres and that property runs through Menlo Park – from Oak Tree over to Menlo Park.

R.Terwilliger: Oh my gracious. Was that a farm now or was it just land?

Major Carman: It was just a lot of woods and so forth. Of course this is very early. And my grandfather Carman built a house, which is still standing in Menlo Park. It's on the Lincoln Highway and is known right now ...oh I forget now just what they call it.

R.Terwilliger: Is it Menlo Hall?

Major Carman: Menlo Hall, that's right.

R.Terwilliger: Menlo Hall, right. I think I've seen that sign up there. Is that the great big house that sits back off the road?

Major Carman: That's it, yes.

R.Terwilliger: And at one time it seems to me as a child I remember it used to have an elk or something on the front lawn?

Major Carman: No, I don't remember that because it had nothing to do with the Elks.

R.Terwilliger: No, I realize that. I thought maybe it was like a deer I guess is what I'm thinking of.

Major Carman: No, well I don't remember that.

R.Terwilliger: But that has the widow's walk up top? Is that the one? Where you can see what they used to call the widow's walk or the captain's walk?

Major Carman: Well, that's what we called a cupola.

R.Terwilliger: A cupola?

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: Your grandfather built that house?

Major Carman: My grandfather built that and I used to often go in that cupola and you could look all around the country from there.

R.Terwilliger: Could you see Perth Amboy and the water from up there?

Major Carman: No, I wouldn't say Perth Amboy because there is a hill between Menlo Park and Perth Amboy.

R.Terwilliger: Oh yes.

Major Carman: But it's very high ground there so my father built a house opposite that and I was born in that house. That house burned when I was a very little boy. My father rebuilt on the same foundation. That house was torn down just two or three years ago.

R.Terwilliger: Is that for the McDonald's stand, you told me.

Major Carman: Yes it was.

R.Terwilliger: What a pity. How about the house right next door to it; the last time I was at McDonald's, I noticed that seems to be a pretty old house.

Major Carman: It is. I should imagine about the same age as own old house. That goes back quite a ways because my sister was born there and she died last March and was over a 102 years old.

R.Terwilliger: My gracious, that does come back some. Now if I can get informal, really informal with you for a few moments Major, I'd like to ask you some really in-depth questions. Like what was it like as a young boy in Menlo Park? Was Route 27 a dirt road and what did you do for fun?

Major Carman: It was a dirt road and before I moved to there my father died when I was only 13 but before he died they built a macadam road there.

R.Terwilliger: On Route 27?

Major Carman: On Route 27. It was always known as the Middlesex Essex Turnpike.

R.Terwilliger: Yes, I have heard that.

Major Carman: That road is considerably more than a hundred years old.

R.Terwilliger: Was there much traffic on it at that time?

Major Carman: Well you see, there were no automobiles. Automobiles came in about the time my father died. And it was a dirt road and we had a horse and carriage.

R.Terwilliger: Did you have one in your own family – a horse and carriage?

Major Carman: Oh yes, that was the only way to get around.

R.Terwilliger: Oh my goodness, that's hard to believe. Now where did your mother go to do her shopping?

Major Carman: **Well, my father was a scientific farmer and at that time, my uncle, my grandfather had died - I never saw my grandfather Carman - but my grandmother lived to quite an old age, just like all the Carmans and the Ayers have seemed to have lived quite a number of years.**

R.Terwilliger: That's wonderful.

Major Carman: **Of course I used to play over there in the big house. I used to live there for a part of the time. We used to go over and live there.**

R.Terwilliger: This was in your grandfather's house across the way. Now did you have farm land there?

Major Carman: **They had about 100 acres at that time. My father used to farm a lot of it and had a peach orchard and so forth. He was a scientific farmer.**

R.Terwilliger: What did your father do for a living?

Major Carman: **Well he did a little farming but before that, before I was born, he worked with Thomas Edison.**

R.Terwilliger: Oh, let's talk about that a little bit.

Major Carman: **Well the whole family knew the Edison family, in fact my two sisters who were much older than I used to play with the Edison children. And my sister who died last March was quite a favorite with Edison.**

R.Terwilliger: With Mr. Edison himself?

Major Carman: **Well yes. You see they all knew Edison pretty well because there was nothing whatever stuck up about Mr. Edison and no one seemed to know who he was until he was introduced because he was right with the men all the time.**

R.Terwilliger: That's what I've read. As I've told you before my own young son is terribly interested in Edison and in his research for a report he made just recently, that was pointed out that no one that ever came into his laboratories or his factories ever knew or could say, "Well that's Mr. Edison, he's got the suit on and he looks like an executive." They said he always looked like just like the men.

Major Carman: **He was one of the men and his greatest discoveries were right in Menlo Park.**

R.Terwilliger: That is such a pity that there is not more left there.

Major Carman: We have tried awfully hard. I am chairman of the Advisory Committee there. We're trying to get the State to do something and I had a promise just within a week or so that they will get down there and do something to get the Legislature to do something.

R.Terwilliger: I certainly hope so. Let's hope we'll live long enough to see it happen. To get back to your family's relationship with the Edison family, can you tell us anything about what were they like as a family? Were they very average people and did you "borrow a cup of sugar" kind of neighbors?

Major Carman: Well they were ordinary people and friendly.

R.Terwilliger: They had three children also?

Major Carman: Yes, there were three children. I don't know whether they were born at Menlo Park or they moved there after these children were born. There were three children by his first wife. There was William, Thomas and they called her Dottie - Dottie Edison from "Dot and Dash".

R.Terwilliger: Oh goodness, that's interesting.

Major Carman: Mr. Edison worked hard on this incandescent light and a neighbor of ours, Mr. Force was right with him on the invention. And my father was among the very first to hear the phonograph.

R.Terwilliger: Is it true that I heard that it was your sister who did some of the recording for Mr. Edison? Did she speak?

Major Carman: Mr. Edison wanted my sister – she was a very little girl then – to speak in the phonograph and she was rather bashful but she did speak in the phonograph. And the broadcasting station, when my sister was 100 years old, the broadcasting station around Tom's River got her to speak and had an interview and that was broadcast from there. And they called her "the first broadcaster".

R.Terwilliger: Oh for goodness sakes, isn't that wonderful. And that was when she was 102 years old?

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: That's really remarkable. Now do you remember Edison at all? You were a very little boy.

Major Carman: Well I think Edison moved from there I think just about the time I was born but I did meet Mr. Edison when he received his Doctor of Science degree at Rutgers. I went up and spoke to him and introduced myself and we had a very, very pleasant talk about Menlo Park.

R.Terwilliger: And how old were you then when you met him, when he got his degree?

Major Carman: It was a few years after I graduated from college.

R.Terwilliger: So you were a young man yourself then at the time.

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: And he did stand and chat with you for a while?

Major Carman: Yes, yes, we had a wonderful time together.

R.Terwilliger: You know there was a story that I had heard that he had built a railroad from up where his laboratory was into Pumptown Corner. Is that true? Did you ever ride in that?

Major Carman: There was nothing there when I was a little boy. I used to play – several of us kids used to play around those old buildings. And then we used to walk on the old train road but there wasn't much left. But in later years when I became an engineer I did a lot of work around there and I located to the best of my ability the location of the old railroad track and made a map of it and that map is in the tower at Menlo Park.

R.Terwilliger: Oh that's wonderful. Now there is a section to the bottom of the tower that has some artifacts stored in it that you can go in to look at.

Major Carman: There is practically nothing in the tower. See, you're only allowed to go in the first floor and you can see the eternal light – that's about all there is there. The second floor no one is allowed to go there because there they have the batteries and things and the public is not allowed to go in there. But there is a small museum nearby and they have a few things that pertain to Edison but not very much.

R.Terwilliger: But there are no remaining buildings or his home. Did they tear all of that down? His house and the laboratory?

Major Carman: Well he lived near the Lincoln Highway near where that flagpole is.

R.Terwilliger: I see, where the monument is.

Major Carman: On the Lincoln Highway near or on the corner of Christie Street in Menlo Park. And that house was occupied a number of times. It was deeded over by Mr. Edison to his daughter Dottie Edison and she told me that she never got much rent out of it and it was all costly and never once had rented it and finally it burned down. There was a school there. I went to school in Lafayette first, I was a very small boy when I went over to Lafayette School.

R.Terwilliger: Was this in Menlo Park?

Major Carman: That's in Menlo Park near the shopping center.

R.Terwilliger: Near where Menlo Park Shopping Center is?

Major Carman: No, well yes it's called Menlo Park Shopping Center. It's on Parsonage Road near Route 1. That school was torn down and a large building is placed there. But I went there. It was a one-room school with one teacher.

R.Terwilliger: Oh my gracious.

Major Carman: And then so many of us who lived in Menlo Park went to that school.

R.Terwilliger: What grades did it go through?

Major Carman: Fifth grade.

R.Terwilliger: Through to fifth grade. And did you walk from your home on Route 27?

Major Carman: That was the only way or occasionally in bad weather the families would take us to school or collect us. Then they decided to have a new school in Menlo Park and before that was finished some of my relatives got permission from Edison to occupy that house as a school. I went to school in his old home for a few months and then we moved into the new school, which is not far from the tower. That was torn down and finally burned down.

R.Terwilliger: Goodness, they've had their problems with schools in Menlo Park.

Major Carman: Yes, yes.

R.Terwilliger: I was thinking when you were talking about going to school out on Parsonage Road about do you think winters were more severe in this area than they are now?

Major Carman: Yes, I do.

R.Terwilliger: Do you remember it being very snowy in the wintertime?

Major Carman: Well I think we had more snows than we do now.

R.Terwilliger: Really?

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: Major Carman, I wanted to ask you. I guess you went all through grade school in Menlo Park up to 7th grade.

Major Carman: I went until 7th grade and then my father died and my mother and I went to Rahway to live with my mother's sister and I went to school in Rahway for two years in grammar and two years high school. Then I went to Rutgers Prep and I put in three semesters in Rutgers Prep.

R.Terwilliger: Was this training to become an engineer now?

Major Carman: Well yes, and then I finished the prep school in three semesters and then I took examinations for Rutgers. Then I went to Rutgers for four years and received my Bachelor of Science degree and then a few years later my civil engineer degree. And then after that I applied for membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers and now I'm a life member of that.

R.Terwilliger: That's very nice and then you are probably a professional engineer with a PE license?

Major Carman: Yes, I'm a professional engineer.

R.Terwilliger: Were you still living in Rahway when you went to Rutgers?

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: And you were ready now with your education completed to go out into the working world and seek a career. Major, before you leave this period of life I would like to ask you – what was college life like back when you went to school at Rutgers?

Major Carman: Life at Rutgers when I was there was entirely different than what it is now. The classes were very much smaller. Our class when we matriculated was slightly over 100, about 40 graduated. We had personal contact with the professors which I always enjoyed and received my little education that way.

R.Terwilliger: You mean there was a lot of personal attention then.

Major Carman: **A lot of personal attention. The professors were really interested in their pupils.**

R.Terwilliger: That's wonderful. You're very right when you say it isn't like that at all today. It's very rarely like that today. And did you live on campus?

Major Carman: **No I lived at home. I lived in Rahway at the time and commuted.**

R.Terwilliger: That's what I was interested in. I was thinking about it and I thought, what kind of a car drive you have?

Major Carman: **There were no cars at that time.**

R.Terwilliger: Oh, there were no cars, okay.

Major Carman: **I took the railroad train.**

R.Terwilliger: You took the railroad train from Rahway into New Brunswick and then of course you could walk up to the college.

Major Carman: **I walked, yes.**

R.Terwilliger: Right. And was there a group of you that traveled with on the train, were there a number of other students?

Major Carman: **There were a great many students there, they were scattered on the train. We'd sit together but there were great many commuters who were going to college.**

R.Terwilliger: I don't know if you remember exactly off hand and I don't want you to tax your memory, but do you remember what year it was when you graduated?

Major Carman: **I graduated in 1908.**

R.Terwilliger: 1908, my gracious. And that was at your graduation when Thomas Edison came to the graduation ceremony?

Major Carman: **It was some few years after I graduated Mr. Edison received his doctor of science degree**

R.Terwilliger: From Rutgers?

Major Carman: **From Rutgers, and I was over there at the time. I went up to see him, introduced myself and we had a very pleasant, a long talk.**

R.Terwilliger: Did he remember you as a small boy?

Major Carman: **No, because Edison moved from Menlo Park about the time I was born or within a few years.**

R.Terwilliger: How about your sisters?

Major Carman: **My sisters were much older than I and they knew Edison quite well. In fact one of the sisters was the first to ever talk into the phonograph. My father was among the very first who ever heard the phonograph because he was working with Edison at the time. And my father and mother and two sisters knew the Edison family quite well.**

R.Terwilliger: That's really, really interesting. When you finished college what was your first job? What did you go out and do? Did you go out to work right away?

Major Carman: **Well before I graduated, between the semesters, I worked with an engineer in Rahway, Mr. Moss who was a city engineer and I got some very valuable training there.**

R.Terwilliger: In a surveying party then?

Major Carman: **Well surveying. After I graduated there was practically no work for a few months, it was all the depression. And I finally got a job as an engineer with the county engineers. And I laid out part of the road which is between Rahway and Elizabeth.**

R.Terwilliger: What is that road called?

Major Carman: **It was a very old road but we made it out of green ranges and so forth so I had to take charge of that under the county engineer.**

R.Terwilliger: Where you a party chief as they call someone who heads a surveying party?

Major Carman: **Well I was a party chief but there were only two of us in the party.**

R.Terwilliger: If I'm not being too personal, do you remember how much you made then?

Major Carman: **I remember when I was working for the city engineer of Rahway I made as much as \$2.00 a day.**

R.Terwilliger: \$2.00 a day! That must have been good money back then too. Now they want that much in an hour and then some, to start out with too. Well I think that is so interesting. And I think it brings us to a portion of your life that I'm curious to know if you don't mind sharing it with us, and that is how did you meet Mrs. Carman?

Major Carman: **Well cataracts developed and I went to Pioneer to have the cataracts removed and I met my wife there. She was a nurse.**

R.Terwilliger: How old were you then Mr. Carman?

Major Carman: **I must have been close to forty.**

R.Terwilliger: Close to 40, well then you were a bachelor for a long time.

Major Carman: **Yes I was.**

R.Terwilliger: So your wife was a nurse in a hospital where you had cataract surgery done.

Major Carman: **Yes. She was not on the floor but she was working with the doctors at the time of the operation.**

R.Terwilliger: Then you courted for a while and got acquainted and decided you'd marry.

Major Carman: **Yes.**

R.Terwilliger: That's very, very nice, Major. Did you marry in Rahway or in her hometown? Where were you married?

Major Carman: **I was married in her hometown of Sussex, New Jersey.**

R.Terwilliger: That's a lovely area. And when did you build this house then in Metuchen. Was this your first home here?

Major Carman: **I rented before I built.**

R.Terwilliger: I see. You and your wife.

Major Carman: **Then I built this house about 52 years ago.**

R.Terwilliger: But you and your wife lived in this home most of your married life together.

Major Carman: **Oh yes. Of course we traveled a lot too with my work with the government.**

R.Terwilliger: Yes, that's what I did want to ask you. Before we leave the house though; it's such a beautiful home, I just want people to realize what a lovely home it is and some of the interesting things you've told me about it. To start with, did you survey the piece of property that the house was built on?

Major Carman: **Yes, I surveyed it. At the time I was with the government. I held a title office with the government. We prepared the title and I designed it.**

R.Terwilliger: Very, very good. And I understand then that you designed the house, the layout, the floor plans and everything. But did you actually do the building on it or did you contract that out?

Major Carman: Most of the work was done by day's labor in this house.

R.Terwilliger: You mean by different individuals and day's labor. And I understand the fireplace here, I'd like to describe it. It's a beautiful fireplace made of all natural stone. If I'm correct Major, didn't you tell me that's the very stone that came out of the ground?

Major Carman: A lot of that stone came out of the ground but I bought some.

R.Terwilliger: I see, but it's all native Jersey stone.

Major Carman: Yes.

R.Terwilliger: It's just a beautiful fireplace, it really is, and a very, very comfortable home. I must describe all the beautiful dark woodwork and the lovely staircase and very bright and cheery lovely windows throughout the house. And you wife and you lived here then for about 30 years, was it?

Major Carman: No we only lived here – I was only married a little over five years when she died.

R.Terwilliger: Oh I didn't realize that. I thought she was much older than that. That must have been a very sad moment in your life.

Major Carman: Well it was.

R.Terwilliger: But we'll move on. It's five years after you were married and your wife has passed away. Were you working for the government then, Major?

Major Carman: No I finished with the government about that time.

R.Terwilliger: When you say working for the government, was this when you worked out at the Arsenal?

Major Carman: No, I wasn't married when I was with the arsenal, when I was an officer in the Army. But later, shortly after we were married I was called to Washington because I was still with the Reserve Corps on defense work and I traveled quite a little from Long Island to the Middle West on various jobs.

R.Terwilliger: My gracious, you did do a lot of traveling then. Well I think that pretty much completes you life, Major, except to say that I know personally, having visited you here in your home that you are still active and doing your work, your trade as an engineer and

architect, just as bright eyed as can be. But before we finish our taping I want to know about some of the headstones I've seen up in the old colonial cemetery that have the Carman name on them. They must be relatives of yours.

Major Carman: **Well they are. The Carman's have a good-sized plot there and in the old cemetery my great grandfather, who was a Major in the Revolution, is buried in that plot.**

R.Terwilliger: And did he actually take part in any skirmishes here in this area? Was he killed during the Revolution?

Major Carman: **No, I understood he was wounded.**

R.Terwilliger: But he just died a normal death in his own private life. And they are all relatives that are buried up there?

Major Carman: **Yes.**

R.Terwilliger: That's very interesting. Major, before we complete this taping, can I ask you to reflect a little bit and tell us about what Main Street was like in about 1910 or 1912?

Major Carman: **Yes, Main Street was the same width it is today, a 56' wide road. It was a country road - at that time there was a trolley track in it.**

R.Terwilliger: And the trolley track went from where?

Major Carman: **It went from Amboy Avenue to Christol Street, through town and the pavement was not very wide. In fact in portions of it there were ditches on either side and small paths that went from the sidewalk to the street.**

R.Terwilliger: And were there many shops along Main Street?

Major Carman: **There were a few shops. That was the shopping center for the entire area there.**

R.Terwilliger: I remember pictures I've seen of an old A&P. Was that there at that time? Do you remember the A&P that used to be on Main Street?

Major Carman: **Well I designed one on Main Street and then later we designed the other A&P, the present one, and designed a great many A&P stores.**

R.Terwilliger: How about other buildings on Main Street that you've designed?

Major Carman: **Well I designed the Forum Theater.**

R.Terwilliger: The Forum Theater? For goodness sakes, that's wonderful. And do you remember about when that was built? I'm really putting you on the spot here.

Major Carman: Quite a number of years ago.

R.Terwilliger: It's quite old. I know I grew up in that theater and it's still going strong. It had been used from the early or mid 1900's. We can pretty much judge the age of it. How about the electrification of Metuchen? Do you remember when the first electric lights came into Metuchen?

Major Carman: No I don't. That was before I was born.

R.Terwilliger: Before your time, I see.

Major, I truly want to thank you for doing this taping. You have been an extremely interesting subject and I'm sure for years to come we will ever be grateful to you for taking the time to complete this tape for future generations to enjoy. Thank you Major Charles Carman.

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