

Ruth Eby

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Interviewer: David Heinlein
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, August 2005 & Laura Cubbage-Draper, December 2018
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Abstract: Mary Ruth (Burroughs) Eby (1896-1997) was the daughter of Edward Allen Burroughs and Mary Ann “Mamie” Mook, and the sister of Elsie (Burroughs) Potter and Edward Allen Burroughs Jr. Mrs. Eby was born in the house (later used as a convent for The White Sisters of Africa) located directly opposite of the Woodwild Park gates on Middlesex Avenue. She and her family later moved to 407 Middlesex Avenue.

Mrs. Eby graduated from Franklin School in 1913 and attended Trenton Normal School. She worked as teacher for neurologically-impaired children in Newark and New Brunswick. Mrs. Eby was a dedicated member of the Dutch Reformed Church and she acted in several local plays organized by the Delphic Dramatic Association. She married Ivan Eby, a merchant marine officer, and they had three daughters: Barbara (a painter), Patricia (a musician), and Adelaide (a sculptor). She and her husband left Metuchen in the 1920s, but they later returned in the 1950s and lived at 24 Rector Street. Mrs. Eby is buried with her family at Hillside Cemetery. Her oral and written recollections of early Metuchen life are a valuable part of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society’s archives.

During this interview, Mrs. Eby discusses life in rural Metuchen during the early twentieth century up to World War I. These recollections include her early childhood activities as well as additional anecdotes about the town. Other topics she touches upon include Dismal Swamp, the town hack, the gypsies, various social activities and events, and World War I.

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D. Heinlein: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... interviewing Mrs. Ruth Eby of Metuchen for the Metuchen Public Library. This is David Heinlein. This interview takes place on Tuesday, November 22, 1977. [recording paused]

R. Eby: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... This town [Metuchen] was distinctly rural.

D. Heinlein: Nineteen hundred?

R. Eby: That’s right. It had unobstructed views. There were only forty-eight houses in the whole northeast quadrant of the town. I have counted them over and over and I can’t get above forty-eight houses. So you can see that the picture over there of the sunset, which was painted by a Metuchen girl, Florence De Forest [who lived on

Woodbridge Avenue], was painted from Redfield's Pond looking down over the town and is typical of what the town looked like.

D. Heinlein: When did you first come to town, Mrs. Eby?

R. Eby: I was born here—

D. Heinlein: You were born here?

R. Eby: Yeah, in a house where the [The White Sisters of Africa] nuns had their convent on Middlesex Avenue. Now, there were only seven ponds in the town at the time, but there are only three of those seven left because the water level has changed so. But you can see by looking at that picture, which is typical, that anyone could look and have a spread of the sky with only perhaps a church spire to interrupt the view, you see. It was a great sweep of land. When I was child, I lived on Middlesex Avenue, opposite Woodwild Park. Do you know where that is?

D. Heinlein: No.

R. Eby: Well it's where there are stone gates over there on Route 27 [Middlesex Avenue] and a little patch of greenery set aside by the [Charles L.] Corbin family for a park [Woodwild Park], and I really think the town does not make enough of it because it's a beautiful little spot. We lived across the street from that. And over in the park were some small patches of primeval forest trees, and of course as a child, and I played there; it was a beautiful place to play. And I learned about country things—devil's snuff-boxes, acorns, and all the pretty wildflowers, mountain laurel and so on. And it was very beautiful and interesting in front of the house. But out back—oh boy—was more entertainment because our property, which was in the neighborhood of four acres, ran back to what is now Clarendon Court. And there was an entire block of uninterrupted land, almost vacant, which ran from Rector Street all the way up to Grove Avenue and from back of our house on Middlesex [Avenue] over to Hillside [Avenue] and Daniels Hill.

D. Heinlein: That must be pretty large.

R. Eby: It was a large patch of land, and the only break in the open field was a cluster of great big oak trees, like an oasis in the middle of this open place. A few of those trees still stand on the corner of Huxley Road and Clarendon. And it was a source of beauty, but also a source of entertainment because every fall the water would collect down back of our fence and there'd be a great big town skating pond. And there'd be, perhaps, a hundred people skating there some time on a Thanksgiving Day. We had earlier winters it seems to me in those days. In the summer, it was a golf course. So we always had entertainment out back. Our fence ran along that pond, and the pond was deep enough so that muskrats would line up along the fence—maybe six or seven of them—and if a passerby disturbed them, they'd go off kerplunk, kerplunk into the water; you could hear them splash, so you may know it was deep. But as I say, the water level was different and we had much more water around. And in the spring, there was always a brook running down what is now Clarendon Court. And it ran down Clarendon, across Rector Street, down Highland [Avenue] and

disappeared someplace underground under Main Street and went down along the railroad tracks and out to Dismal Swamp¹.

D. Heinlein: Dismal Swamp?

R. Eby: Do you know Dismal Swamp?

D. Heinlein: No. No.

R. Eby: Well it's a housing development now, but it was a big morass of deep swamp. I have been up to my middle in Dismal Swamp.

D. Heinlein: Yeah. Was there a lake around it? Or was it just a swamp?

R. Eby: No, just a real swamp, a morass, with tall grasses and festoons of vines hanging on the trees. A real—

D. Heinlein: Scary place?

R. Eby: —sinister looking place. Yes. It was a big swamp over toward the South Plainfield area. I think—well it's dried up now. I know because there's a housing development there. But as I say, there were plenty of ponds around and of the seven that were in the town limits, there are only three left. And houses are built on the ponds that are dried up, which is interesting from a housing development point of view.

There was a brook that used to run intermittently down across under Main Street. When I was kid, I remember standing on a plank bridge and looking down at the water running, which disappeared under the Main Street. I don't know where it went to—I don't know where it came from—but there was enough water running around to have a bridge over it. And it [the brook] ran right by the Middlesex Water Company office, which was kind of a shed, a little shed on Main Street in those days. And I'm always amused when I see people pumping water out of the five-and-ten cent store cellar because I know why. [laughs] Well, that is for the topography we'll say. But the people—you'd like to know about them?

D. Heinlein: Yes.

R. Eby: They were friendly and sociable. They were just as they are today and always will be. But of course, their socializing took quite a different form because they weren't as mobile as we are. They had to walk where they wanted to go and to walk someplace takes time. You can't get there that fast and it's true that many people had horses, but a horse can only go so far in a day too. And once, I remember my parents drove with friends—Mr. & Mrs. [Charles] Prickitt, who were Dolly Buchanan's parents—drove in a light carriage and a team all the way to Lake Hopatcong, in fact, on a real vacation trip. It took them three days. And if one went to Plainfield, it took all day. And in fact, even on the trolley car, to go to New Brunswick or Perth Amboy took the better part of a day to do that. But of course, the people enjoyed themselves in their narrow circles just as anyone would. They played games, they had sporting contests, and down in the ball field, which was opposite the Franklin School [on Middlesex Avenue], they had amateur theatricals,

¹ Dismal Swamp is a marshy area bordering Edison, Metuchen, and South Plainfield.

with strictly local talent. And of course, the ladies of the elite had a rigid routine of afternoon calls.

D. Heinlein: Really?

R. Eby: Oh yes, they had calls complete with calling cards to leave in the dish on the hostess' hall table, and the dignity of a hack for transportation. Now the town hack was owned by John Dempsey and he hired it out for occasions, great and small, and did justice to the degree of the importance of the event in certain stated ways. He hired out a carriage for calling, but he insisted on a coach rental for a more formal matter. And the fare, I remember, at one time was—oh horror—raised to thirty-five cents from twenty-five! Well, he had a span of speckled gray horses and they were whipped with a whip, which had a decorative white bow for weddings and a discreet black bow for funerals. And he'd come and say, "Are you all in, Mum?" and as he tucked his plush robe in, he'd get on and say "Go on, go on, go on" to the horses and off we'd go. But a lady couldn't go calling on an afternoon when John Dempsey's hack was already hired out—there was only one. She waited at home until a better day. There was time enough for each and every one to have her turn with the hack because there weren't so many people around. He finally got around to everybody.

D. Heinlein: I see. Yeah.

R. Eby: Now the amateur shows were held in a real firetrap over the Metuchen Hardware Store [Robins Hall], three stories up—up winding stairs, oh boy! And they were great fun. They had minstrel shows with local [unclear] and even little theater attempts at slightly risqué themes sometimes. And once, a local matron played in a role which called for plaid stockings, real black and white plaid stockings and a short skirt almost up to her knees. And for that there was plenty of tongue wagging, believe me!

Now we had a town club [Metuchen Club], which was the building now presently used as the Masonic Temple [Mount Zion Lodge No. 135]. And the evening parties averaged about five each year. But once a year they had children's parties and the teenagers had a party about once a year. I remember seeing Halley's Comet down at a club party—that must have been about 1910, I think was Halley's Comet. But we always had the same thing—lemonade for refreshment; lemonade and cookies. But that club had a cruel trick, and I was thinking about it the other day. Every month they posted in large letters down in the lobby, the names of the families who didn't pay their dues! And I think that was a miserable thing to do because plenty of tongues wagged about that. But I must say that the dues got paid! [laughs]

D. Heinlein: Yeah. Did everybody in town belong to the club?

R. Eby: Oh no, only the—

D. Heinlein: The proper people?

R. Eby: The proper people. But, prior to that, there's the matter of learning about other people, beside your local neighborly associates. And I remember one incident that taught me there were other places than Metuchen. I must have been about four. A neighbor's son, Bert Peck [Egbert Peck], went to Panama to help in laying out the canal and got yellow fever and died [in 1905]. And then I remember, one day, a

great commotion on our street. A neighbor's father ran down the street to catch a train to go to Baltimore because Baltimore was on fire; they had a great city conflagration. So, of course, that registered with me that Metuchen wasn't the only city on the map. And so we learned.

Now town events of some moment were things that I remember. About 1901 or 1902, there was a torchlight parade after an election. There were no streetlights in those days; it was a black night. And about twenty-five men came yelling and hooting up the street, with kerosene lanterns in their hands. And they stopped in front of our house and behaved like rowdies because my father [Edward Allen Burroughs] had voted the other way about the women. And I was thinking of you when I was remembering this story because they woke me up. My parents woke me up to see this torchlight parade, which was a big event. And I thought how your dad woke you up to watch Cornell's barn burning.

D. Heinlein: I was just thinking about.

R. Eby: See that?

D. Heinlein: Yeah, because that was one of the major events—

R. Eby: —of your childhood. Middlesex, right?

D. Heinlein: I remember cars parked all along the road and this was out in the middle of Piscataway, in the middle of nowhere. I don't know what time that barn started burning, but it was the highest part of the hill, the highest part of the whole surrounding area, and that was a real fire.

R. Eby: Oh, of course it was. It was a big, big barn. Oh, it's a traumatic experience to see a house burn down or a barn. Well then one time in the night, we had a terrible—I was awakened with a terrible explosion. An engine on the tracks here exploded right at the station with some fatal results, believe me. And the pieces of iron from the locomotive flew as far as a half mile away through the town, up and down Main Street. And the town telephone operator, who manned the switchboard all night, although I don't know why it was necessary—her name was Daisy Martin—had a nervous breakdown [laughs] because of this business. There were only eight telephones in Metuchen at that time, and we were one of the eight. Oh boy, we were fab!

Now there's this controversial story that my sister [Elsie (Burroughs) Potter] and I have this running battle about, about the Victoria that ran to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. Have you heard of that yet?

D. Heinlein: No.

R. Eby: There was a stagecoach, and it was run for pleasure, not for profit. My sister says it was a coach with a top-seated arrangement, and I say it was a Victoria. And we're each insisting to the other that we can plainly see, plainly remember what we saw in those days. So I'm telling you what I think I saw, which was a Victoria cut-out, staged, fairy-tale sort of attraction, three men in high hats and morning striped trousers and so on, riding backwards facing three elaborately dressed ladies with ostrich plumes in their hat and parasols, a coachman up front, and two footmen up

behind with tally-ho horns, **doo doot do doo!** [laughs] And they'd go down every Tuesday morning to Philadelphia, and come back Friday afternoon. And I say a man named Iselin, Adrian Iselin, who was a rich man from New York, ran it because I heard that they changed horses in Iselin and he had a big barn at the station, which barn I remember. And they changed horses in Iselin and that's how the town got its name, from Adrian Iselin's barn, which makes sense. And then the next stop for horse changing was beyond Kingston around Princeton, and then on to Philadelphia, and then back. But my sister says a man named Hyde ran it, so you can take our choice. But we've had some argument about this. However, it was an event when we'd hear the tally-ho horn coming and we'd all run out and see it go by.

But that was as nothing compared to the gypsies. I wonder if you've heard about the gypsies.

D. Heinlein: No, I haven't. I have been in contact with gypsies.

R. Eby: Have you?

D. Heinlein: Yeah. But I believe you're going to talk about the gypsies in Metuchen now or the gypsies who came through?

R. Eby: Well, it seems that there was a rendezvous every fall. And there was an inn over there by Plainfield Avenue named the Gypsy Rendezvous; it was on Route 1, a roadhouse. And it was well-named because that is the center of where the gypsies met. All the gypsy tribes in the country east of the Mississippi, which took in plenty of gypsies, believe me, would come every fall and meet. There was a great stand of oak woods—oak trees there from about—well this side of Stelton all the way to the Highland Park boundary and all the way down to the Raritan River. And the trolley car went through that territory. And when we'd go on the trolley to New Brunswick, there was a switch; we'd stop there waiting for the on-coming trolley to pass us. You see there was only the single track, and the gypsies would camp. I think there may have been a hundred wagons in that forest. It was a site I shall never forget. It was so exotic. Each group of people had their own camp fires with big pots cooking food, horses all tethered around, the women in purple and red clothes, draperies, and music, very inflammatory music, and sometimes people dancing and shouting. Oh, it was indescribably lovely to see those gypsies. They were so—

D. Heinlein: How old were you when you saw them?

R. Eby: I would say five, four or five.

D. Heinlein: And how many times did you see them.

R. Eby: Well, three. At least three years. And well I'll tell you about these gypsies more because they came—I don't know how many years before I came along, were they camping here—but they would come every year and stay for about a month. And then all of a sudden overnight without any noise or goodbyes, like magic, they disappeared! No warning, no farewells. Indeed, there'd been no greetings so why should there be farewells. But the word would get around fast! And every citizen would run and tell his neighbor, "Get your horse in the barn because the gypsies are leaving." Gypsies had a bad name for thievery, you know? So sure enough in a few

days, we'd start seeing the caravans coming, passing the house on their way home, maybe fifteen or twenty wagons in the line, the women sitting in the back of the wagons looking out, always silent, silently looking out from behind draped curtains. I believe the gypsies continued to meet up until about 1912, when I understand that the [First] Balkan War in Europe disturbed their way of life in some fashion, and they never met here again. But that was a site I shall never, never forget.

But, by the time the teenage—the teen years came around, 1912 on—then everything turned into World War I talk, and the Raritan Arsenal and all was of interest. But the gypsies were not the only threat to a little child's play yard. We had tramps. In those days we had many, many vagabonds at the turn of the century on through that decade. They passed through our town and they were a factor that we're constantly taking into account. The Spanish American War had discharged soldiers by the hundreds, and they were idle and hungry and really on the prowl. My mother [Mamie (Mook) Burroughs] warned me each day to stay out of the road because of the tramps.

So, now let me see, what else can I tell you? This town was beautiful in those days. I remember seeing Benner's Field, now that's a tract of land which runs from Clive Street to Grove Avenue and that's from Main Street up to Grove. Many acres it was. I remember seeing that tract stretched out in a wide spread of solid daisies! Just like a carpet, solid white. It was a site that you wouldn't see around here anymore, anywhere. And at the same time, Benner's had a well with an old oaken bucket in it and we pulled it up on the chain and drank beautiful spring water. And also in the spring, up at [Fred] Peck's [farm] there on the corner of Grove and Middlesex, you can go along a road past a big apple orchard where the Jewish Temple [Neve Shalom] is now. And the apple orchard was in bloom, you could go past and up the hill to a gravel pit—over here by the insulated railroad—and on the top of the hill was a woods and the woods was carpeted with spring beauties, carpeted thick with these purple and white wildflowers that you could walk up. Oh, it was so beautiful! Kids may find a place like that, I don't know.

Now there's one place that should be mentioned in any history of Metuchen, and that is Daniels Hill. And Daniels Hill is gone now—it was at the top of Hillside Avenue up there—because the bulldozers came and dug the hill away, and the developer moved in and burned down the [Manning] Daniels house, and so on. But in the early 1900s, every kid in town went up to Daniels Hill to sleigh ride. Two families had toboggans and the rest of us just had sleds. But, like good sports, the two with the toboggans gave us all turns, five in a line on a toboggan. And the hill was black with children all the time, all winter. But on cold nights, Miss Jenny Daniels, who was an old lady, used to make great big pots of hot cocoa and bring out to all the skaters and the kids, and never once drove us off her property. Wasn't that sweet of that old lady? So, it was a beautiful world to grow up in.

D. Heinlein: I guess it was. About how many children did you play with when you were growing up?

R. Eby: I would say no more than two. Because we couldn't get any place. Nobody had near neighbors because your neighbors were an intrusion of your privacy. If anybody built a house nearer than 500 feet, that was an offense practically. And for a little child, who had near neighbors, in and out the way they are now with developments, it was unheard of. If you had a child come to play, their mother brought them usually and called while you played for an hour or two. But I had no little playmates

and it wasn't a common practice for children to play in groups. People were self-sufficient because they were lonely, although they didn't know that about them. And I think that was conducive to imaginative living because they had companions with their little make-believe friends.

So, I don't know who's the loser or gainer in that situation, but I know I was far from unhappy and never bored. If you had that much ground (a good plot of ground), first of all, there's things to do—you have a barn, you have a horse, a cow, chickens, garden, fruit trees. You can go out and pick peaches, grapevines, hay. I used to make houses in the field next to our house, which was our field. And I had bashed down the leaves and the hay, whatever it was. It must have been some kind of hay because I remember my father taking the farm wagon out of our barn and piling it with a big mound of hay and riding in on the hay mound and feeding it to the horses, so it must have been hay. And I'd spend hours looking at clover and playing, making clover bouquets and eating sour grass. Do you know what sour grass is?

D. Heinlein: Yes.

R. Eby: Good for you. [laughs] That's good, it has little red dot berries in it and I used eat it. It's nasty stuff. And I can't remember ever being bored. I guess children often say now, "Well I don't know what to do, I haven't anything to do." But in rural living, there's always something to do. You have animals. You have nature to observe. A sunset and a sunrise is as important to me, and has been all my life, as anything the day has brought forth. And I think it's because I had exposure to them as a child. I remember by 1910, around 1909, we had moved to this corner over here [at 407 Middlesex Avenue]—Rector [Street] and Middlesex, across from the [St. Luke's] Episcopal Church—waking in the morning and looking out my bedroom window through this way over to Daniels Hill and seeing the sun come up. There were no houses. This was the difference between then and now. When you looked, you looked far to a horizon, not into somebody's yard. And every morning I'd see the sun come up over Daniels Hill and there would be what seemed like thousands, literally thousands of birds chirping. Now it is true, I do hear birds, yes, but not in the quantities. It used to seem as if the whole sky was vibrating with these birds' exuberance, exuberant music in the morning, every morning, morning after morning in the spring. That was something that really made me happy every day. It was a lovely experience. And I remember old things like the sunsets from where we lived looking down Middlesex Avenue, my mother reading to me.

One day I had a toothache. I must have been about five, four or five. And she held me on her lap and read to me from the [A] *Child's Garden of Verses*, which is still my favorite book because of this experience! She eased my toothache somehow. She put her warm hand on it or something, read to me. And as I looked down Middlesex Avenue, the sun was going down, this beautiful red sunset, and there was only one church steeple, this Episcopal Church steeple against that red sunset. I was only a little child, but I realized there was beauty because there was nothing to stop from seeing it. And it was a lovely place to grow up in. Metuchen was a lovely town to grow up in. I'm sure it still is, but in quite different ways. I know it's still a very, very nice town.

But then when World War I came, the whole thing fell apart. A whole new tempo and ambition came into everybody's life and the whole world as we knew it

vanished. There may be that rural life left in other places, but certainly not around here.

So I don't know what else to tell you, Sandy. I can't think of anything much more than that.

D. Heinlein: Well I think this has been pretty good for our first try. I know I haven't talked very much because—

R. Eby: Because I wouldn't let you!

D. Heinlein: Right! And I don't know that much, Mrs. Eby, about Metuchen. I've just started the job and I can talk about North Stelton and growing up in North Stelton. And when you talked about the gypsies, that rang a little bit of a bell with me because I remember the carnival over in South Plainfield, which is on the—you know, not in Metuchen but it was in South Plainfield. And I can remember going over with my sister to the carnival and seeing all the odd kinds of people at the carnival.

R. Eby: Was it Forepaugh's? Was that the name of the man [Adam] Forepaugh's Carnival? F-o-r-e-p-a-u-g-h, I think?

D. Heinlein: I don't know. I don't recall.

R. Eby: I think so.

D. Heinlein: Yeah. But that was a strange carnival. That was very interesting.

R. Eby: They're all strange, aren't they?

D. Heinlein: Yeah. Yeah.

R. Eby: Well, that is interesting. And I remember out that way towards North Stelton, when I'd go in a carriage—this must have been after 1910 or I wouldn't have been that far afield—looking over toward the Plainfield Watchung Hills and thinking, "Oh, isn't this exciting, there are mountains! And if I could get over that mountain, I could see farther." And every day, later on, this was about 1914, when I went on the train to Trenton to go to [Trenton] Normal School, I would have a rendezvous with those mountains. Because outside of the New Brunswick [Railroad] Station, where about Deans [in South Brunswick] is, not so far as Deans, but whatever comes next there after New Brunswick. There was a certain track you could look across and see the Watchung Mountains, back of North Plainfield. And I think, *now there's beauty for the day*; I'll hold that—I'll keep that beauty. I don't like this going to Normal School, but I do see the mountains every day. See that was a big thing, to see mountain's nature in all its aspects has always been overpoweringly interesting to me. And I know out along New Durham Road there, you could have a beautiful view of the mountains, so I know they must have figured in your thinking.

D. Heinlein: Yes, yes, I was always glad that—oh, did you ever go to the sea, Mrs. Eby, when you were growing up?

R. Eby: Well no, but that was too far. We did have a Sunday school picnic once a year, but we only got as far as Boynton Beach [in Woodbridge Township]. Do you know where that is?

D. Heinlein: No.

R. Eby: [laughs] Well, we went in a stagecoach. I think we had two stagecoaches for the entire [Dutch] Reformed Church congregation. And each stagecoach had four horses because there were fifty people or something, I don't know how many. But Boynton Beach is where the California Oil Company Refinery is now in Perth Amboy. And it consisted of one pavilion, which was a picnic-type shelter. No carnival attractions at all. But you went—they had bathhouses and you could go swimming in this mudhole, absolute mudhole of a beach! Oh, it was nothing but the Arthur Kill with all the Perth Amboy sewage in it, but we went once a year, had a gorgeous time. I guess I used to go picnic. But I don't remember going to the ocean first until I was up into the twenties.

Although Sandy, I was lucky, because there was a family in town there named Moss, M-o-s-s, there's still Mosses living here, who had a houseboat down at Raritan Bay at [unclear], and they very kindly asked a lot of kids from Metuchen down to their houseboat. And they had canoes and a motorboat and swimming facilities in Raritan Bay, which I guess were none too sanitary, but we all survived. And that was a very fortunate thing for a child to have. But by that time, I was a teenager—thirteen, fourteen. But that was a wonderful experience too, because we'd go canoeing through the salt meadows. And that's a real privilege to canoe through salt meadows because they smell salty.

And by the time one is a teenager, you can get out of town. We walked, all the high school kids, we used to go, think nothing, we used to go to Menlo Park to Mine Gully, if you know where that is. There's no more Mine Gully now; they've put a sewer line through it and filled in the brook—a beautiful brook ran through that gully with stepping stones. You could go across in little white frothy rows. We'd think nothing of running down to Menlo Park after school, and back, and we'd think nothing of going down to the Mill Pond [in Bonhamtown], which is where the Ford Plant [along Route 1 South in Edison] is—that's about two miles, roughly I guess, two and a half. And the Mill Pond had a dam, and that was fun. And there was an ice house down there. And two families in town—one named Oliver, whose descendants are around here yet, and one named Lorensen [phonetic], I don't know what happened to the Lorensens [phonetic]—had ice there which they cut on the Mill Pond in the winter and stored it and then doled it out in the summer. And if you had a big piece of ice, it would last two days, but oh boy, if hot weather came, then you were in trouble. But anyhow, that was the source of cooling and preserving your food—the two icemen. And when the iceman came, it was a big deal for kids because he'd give you a piece of ice. As he chipped the ice across, the little pieces would fall on the ground. And that was good, you could eat them right off the ground. Oh boy! It was wonderful, and plenty dirty.

Then there was a fishman, named Handihan [phonetic] and I think Handi's [phonetic] Fish Fry still comes from Perth Amboy. There are Handihans [phonetic] around in Perth Amboy. And he'd come with fish, and a big scale on the back of his truck with fish after fish, and you could have your choice. I hope he had ice in his

wagon, but I don't know. It was a horse-drawn wagon. Now that fish must have been on the road all day.

But of course, there were no cars. And it was a totally different world: no cars, no radio, of course no television, no radio, no streetlights, no movies. So what did one do, except make up your own stories. It was a far more creative world than spectators. As late as 1914, I remember thinking that Sunday night, when we lived across from the church, was the highlight of the week for us, because we could sit on our front porch and hear the singing over in the Episcopal Church, because that was diversion. You see there were no sources of outside entertainment; one created them. I will say that people played the piano and sang or put on charades and that type of thing for their amusement because that was self-motivating and it had to be so. But that was good. And I'm not saying it was a better world, I'm only saying it was a totally different world. On the other hand, I do like it now when people are a little less formal and have such scope in their lives now that we didn't have. We were pretty hidebound. But it was a very, very fortunate life I had in this town. And I know a lot of other people of my vintage think so too. We had very happy times as kids.

But our school [Franklin School] was run by a man named [Thomas] Van Kirk, who was the principal and such a wonderful teacher—oh, that dear man—was so patient and smart. We had a play yard for the girls on one side, and a play yard for the boys on the other. And no one dared look across to even that terrific boundary. And an old man named Green was the caretaker or landscaper, so to speak. And he spent his time, 90 percent of it as far as I could help out, sitting in the sun and watching all of us play. [laughs] We jumped rope and the boys played ball, but we had no planned activities, no guided play. Everything was self-inspired. But we had some fine, fine teachers. A woman named Flanagan, Miss [Josephine] Flanagan read to us every morning a story after our morning prayers, singing the American song. And she read about a half a paragraph aloud to me in that third grade, from a book called *The Little Lame Prince*. And she read it so beautifully that in a half paragraph, I was immediately in tears. And she unlocked for me, I think, the whole range of tragedy and comedy in that first day she read. She was such a beautiful interpreter. And she was a fine, fine teacher. And a demon for discipline! A demon! People were in terror of her, but see the immeasurable gift she gave to us. Now I know there are still teachers like that, but I'm very thankful to have had her for my first teacher. And those things had a great influence on lives.

Now there was a town drunk. And I have heard from his cousin recently that he went to hear Billy Sunday, the evangelist, on a dare and somehow or other he came back and thought it over and said he wanted to go back and hear him again. So he went back the next Sunday night and heard Billy Sunday again. And the second Sunday night, he went up to the front of the platform and signed the pledge. He'd been an alcoholic for years. He came home and stuck to his pledge and never drank again for, I think, seven years. But one night after seven years' sobriety, he went downtown on a Sunday night and as he was passing one of the saloons—there were two in town at the time—some of the boys saw him and called, "Come on in, so-and-so, and have a beer." "Oh, go on with you," said the drunk, "you know I don't drink anymore." And unfortunately, one man said, "But you don't dare, ha-ha, you don't dare!" And that was the key word and the drunk went in. And five hours later, [he] came reeling out, tripped over the curb, fell out and was run over by a

horse and killed. So you see drama goes on in little towns! I don't know, I heard that story from a man named Ten Eyck, who is the—

D. Heinlein: Cousin?

R. Eby: Cousin. But I think that's an interesting anecdote. Any Metuchenite would recognize the drunk's name who, by the way, was a lovable man as many alcoholics are.

So, my brother [Edward Allen Burroughs Jr.] had the drug store [Metuchen Pharmacy] on the corner [at 396 Main Street] there for sixty years. And people, when he was younger, used to say to him, "Why don't you go get a job in New York? It's more exciting." And he said, "Why should I go to New York? All the tragedy and all the comedy of life comes in the front door of my drug store every day!" So that's Metuchen for you.

D. Heinlein: Yes. Well, I just started going up and down Main Street myself and I see a lot of life going on.

R. Eby: I believe it, yes. I believe it. By the way, do you know that the man who runs the hardware store, Metuchen Hardware Store—

D. Heinlein: [Donald] Wernik? No?

R. Eby: No, not Wernik, he's the druggist. [Donald] Hume. I think this is a lovely story. Hume is quite a snippy guy—this isn't going on the tape now, is it?

D. Heinlein: Yeah, it is.

R. Eby: Oh, well, no. But this is such a beautiful story. He can be pretty snippy. [laughs] Although I admire him more than I do anybody I know almost. He's such a just guy. Two or three years ago, he heard that his brother, his older brother, had kidney ailments and he went down to Carolina and had his kidney taken out and transplanted to his brother and they're both doing well. Isn't that a sweet story?

D. Heinlein: Yeah, that's very nice.

R. Eby: Yes, he's a real fine man, for anybody to do that.

D. Heinlein: Okay, well do you have anything else that you can think of?

R. Eby: Well now we've come up to about World War I time, and I don't think of anything else that I think would be of interest to outsiders or to other people, other than personal things. I don't remember too much more. The town parade—the Fourth of July Parades?

D. Heinlein: What about them?

R. Eby: Oh, they were big deals. Every house had bunting around their porch—porch pillars. And up in the park, Woodwild Park, was a grandstand and we'd have a speaker—a state senator or someone of prominence. Very often, sometimes, it was Dr. [James G.] Mason, who was the [First] Presbyterian minister for several years, who would

make a speech in the afternoon. And one year, we even had a band! They played *Poet and Peasant* and—what’s that other old song? [*The Glow-Worm*. Oh, we thought it was the latest thing! And then at night, we had town fireworks up on the high hill. There’s a big flagpole up in that park at the top of the hill and at the top of the flagpole, the flag could be seen from all over town floating in the breeze. And we had a parade and a band concert one year, and speakers and fireworks at night. And then we’d be so exhausted, we’d go home and have ice cream and cake. And that was a very big day, the Fourth of July.

D. Heinlein: Okay, well I guess I don’t have any other questions to ask you right now that I can think of. Was your husband a Metuchenite?

R. Eby: No, he was a Canadian.

D. Heinlein: I see. I see.

R. Eby: No. Of course, I had some beaus—two or three steady beaus. But one of our group turned out to be quite a famous artist. His name was Reynolds, one of our teenage group. And he used to say, “I’m going to be famous someday and when I am, I’m not going to pay any attention to one of you.” So, it turned out that he did get to be famous and he did not have anything to do with one of us. [laughs] And the rest of us were all pretty sore about it, but at least he gave us fair warning.

Then we had, of course, a decreasing in our ranks with World War I; people went off. Now in World War I, Sandy, there were things that were significant but it’s rather long now, I think we’ve taken up enough space here. However, I will mention that a company of soldiers came and were billeted here in Metuchen for, I think, over a year. And they camped right up here, in fact, in this backyard, right up here where Rubys [phonetic] lives. Every night when we’d go to sleep, we’d hear taps blowing at ten o’clock. A lot of the boys got to be friendly with the whole town and would go all over town. And one morning, like the gypsies, suddenly fife and drum coming through Rector Street, they were marching off, made the square corner and they went marching on. And I think of the company, only fifteen survived in World War I. They were really cut to pieces. But you may believe that having a company of soldiers—how many are there—200 or nearly 200 men in a company?

D. Heinlein: In the company? I’m not sure.

R. Eby: Well I’m not sure either, but there were plenty of strange young men in town and oh whoopee, was that a shot in the arm for all of us! Of course, the local boys had gone, so these strangers moved in and, oh, all the girls blossomed out and cavorted around. It was very exciting. But the war came pretty close to here. We had two or three harrowing experiences. One was that the Gillespie Ammunition Plant² in South Amboy blew up [on October 4, 1918] and it was an earth-shaking noise, believe me! It sounded as if the universe were blowing up. You cannot imagine such a sound if you haven’t heard it. So that gave us a kind of a shake-out of our lifestyle.

And then, also those boys going off and all being killed kind of upset us all. One of our members of the crowd I went with, went off and was blown to pieces. He was a dear, dear boy. Such a dear boy. But the rest went and came back, but Sherman

² T.A. Gillespie Company Shell Loading Plant was sometimes called the Morgan Munitions Depot.

[phonetic] Company was a casualty. And as my grandson said, “He was totaled” in the present jargon. [laughs]

And I guess that’s about it, Sandy.

D. Heinlein: Okay, well thanks very much.

R. Eby: Oh, you’re welcome. It’s been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]