

Interviewee: Mrs. Ruth Eby
Interviewer: David Heinlan
Date: November 22, 1977
Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

Interviewer: We are interviewing Mrs. Ruth Eby of Metuchen for the Metuchen Public Library. This is David Heinlan. This interview takes place on Tuesday, November 22, 1977.

Mrs. Eby: This town was distinctly rural.

Interviewer: In 1900?

Mrs. Eby: That's right it had unobstructed views. There were only 48 houses in the whole northeast quadrant of the town. I have counted them over and over and I can't get above 48 houses. So you can see the picture over there of the sunset which was painted by a Metuchen girl, Florence DeForest, was painted from Redfield's Pond looking down over the town and is typical of what the town looked like.

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

Mrs. Eby: I was born here in a house where the nuns had their convent on Middlesex Avenue. Now, there were only seven ponds in the town at that 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 have a spread of the sky with only perhaps a church spire to interrupt the view. 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?

Interviewer: No.

Mrs. Eby: Well it's where there are stone gates over there on Route 27 and a little patch of greenery set aside by the Corbin family for a park and I really think the town does not make enough of it. 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 I played there. It was a beautiful place to play. And I learned about country things, devils, cookboxes, acorns, all the pretty wildflowers, mountain laurel and so forth. 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 over the hillside and Daniel's Hill.

Interviewer: That must be pretty large.

Mrs. 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. It was a source of beauty and also a source of entertainment because every fall the water would collect down in back of our fence and there would be a great big town skating pond. And there would be perhaps a hundred people skating there sometimes on a Thanksgiving Day. We had earlier winters in those days it seems to me. 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 6 or 7 of them, and if a passerby disturbed them they would 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. It ran down Clarendon, across Rector Street, down Highland and disappeared someplace underground under Main Street and went down along the railroad tracks and out to Dismal Swamp.

Interviewer: Dismal Swamp?

Mrs. Eby: Do you know Dismal Swamp?

Interviewer: No.

Mrs. 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.

Interviewer: Yes. Was there a lake around it?

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

Interviewer: Scary.

Mrs. Eby: It was a sinister looking place. It was a big swamp over toward the South Plainfield area. I think. Well it's dried up now I know because there is a housing development there now. 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. It ran right by the Middlesex Water Company office, which was a kind of a shed, a little shed on Main Street in those days. I'm always amused when I see people pumping water out of the 5 & 10 Cent Store cellar because I know why.

Well, that is for the topography we'll say, but the people – you'd like to know about them.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mrs. Eby: They were friendly and sociable 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. Prickett who were Dolly Buchanan's parents, drove in a light carriage and a team all the way to Lake Hopatcong 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 it took the better part of the 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, they had

amateur theatricals with strictly local talent and of course the ladies of the elite had a rigid routine of afternoon calls.

Interviewer: Really?

Mrs. Eby: Oh yes, they had calls complete with calling cards to leave in the dish on 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 the 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 35 cents from 25! Well he got 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 would 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 that each and every one would have a turn with the hack because there weren't so many people around. He finally got around to everyone.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mrs. Eby: Now the amateur shows were held in a real firetrap, over the Metuchen Hardware Store three stories up; up winding stairs, oh boy. And they were great fun; they had minstrel shows and even little theater attempts at slightly risqué themes sometimes. And once a local matron played in the 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, which was the building now presently used as the Masonic temple. And the evening parties averaged about five each year. But once a year they had children's parties and teenagers had a party about once a year. I remember seeing Hailey's Comet down at a club party – that must have been about 1910, I think was Hailey's Comet. But we always had the some 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!

Interviewer: Did everybody in town belong to the club?

Mrs. Eby: Oh no, only the

Interviewer: The proper people?

Mrs. Eby: The proper people. But prior to that was the matter of learning about other people beside our associates and I remember one incident that taught me there were other places than Metuchen

A neighbor's son went to Panama to help in laying out the Canal and got yellow fever and died. And then I remember one day 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 fire. 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 2 there was a torchlight parade after an election. There were no streetlights in those days, it was a black night. And about 25 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 had voted the other way. 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 because it was a big event. And I thought of how your dad woke you up to watch Cornell's barn burn.

Interviewer: I was thinking about that because that was one of the major events. I remember cars parked all along the roads and this was out in the middle of Piscataway, in the middle of nowhere. I don't know what time that barn fire burning, it was the highest part of the hill; the highest part of the whole surrounding area and that was a real fire.

Mrs. Eby: Oh, of course it was, it was a big, big barn. It's a traumatic experience to see a house burn down or a barn.

Well then one time at night we had 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 were one half mile away up and down Main Street.