

Interviewee: Mrs. Ruth Eby
Interviewer: David Heinlan
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Ruth Eby: Well then one time in the 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 blew as far as a half mile away up and down Main Street. And the telephone operator who manned the switchboard all night – although I don't know why it was necessary – her name was Daisy Martin, has a nervous breakdown because of this business. There were only eight telephones in Metuchen at the time and we were one of the eight. Oh boy, we were fab!

Now there is this controversial story that my sister and I have this running battle about. About the Victoria that ran to Philadelphia. Have you heard of that yet? 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 and plainly remember what we saw in those days. So I'm telling you what I think I saw which was a Victoria with a 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 hats and parasols. A coachman up front and two footmen up behind with tally-ho horns. And they'd go down every Tuesday morning to Philadelphia and come back Friday afternoon. I say a man named Iselin, Adrian Iselin who was a rich man from New York, ran it because I heard they changed horses in Iselin and he had a big barn at the station, which barn I remember. 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 your choice. 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 nothing compared to the gypsies. I wonder if you've heard about the gypsies.

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

Ruth Eby: Have you?

D. Heinlan: Yes. But I believe you're going to talk about the gypsies in Metuchen now or the gypsies that came through?

Ruth Eby: Well, it seems that there was a rendezvous every fall. 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 trees there from about 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. When we'd go on the trolley to New Brunswick there was a switch and 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. Sometimes people were dancing and shouting. It was indescribably lovely to see those gypsies.

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

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

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

Ruth Eby: Well, three. At least three years. And I want to tell you about these gypsies more because they came I don't know how many years before I came along and they were camping here. 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 had been no greeting 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 the draped curtains. I believe the gypsies continued to meet up until about 1912 when I understand that the Balkan War in Europe disturbed their way of life in some fashion and they never met here again. But that is a site I shall never, never forget.

But by the time the teenage 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 in the 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 were 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 warned me each day to stay out of the road because of the tramps.

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. Also in the spring up at Peck's there on the corner of Grove and Middlesex you can go along the road past a big apple orchard where the Jewish Temple is now. And when the apple orchard was in bloom you could go past and up the hill to a gravel pit - over by the insulated railroad - and on the top of hill was a woods and the woods was carpeted with spring beauties, carpeted thick with these purple and white wildflowers that you could walk on. Oh, it was so beautiful. Kids may find a place like that, I don't know.

Now there is one place that should be mentioned in any history of Metuchen and that is Daniel's Hill. Daniel's Hill is gone now. It was at the top of Hillside Avenue up here. The bulldozers came and dug the hill away and the developer moved in and burned down the Daniel's house and so on. But in the early 1900's every kid in town went up Daniel's 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 a turn, 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 to 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. Heinlan: About how many children did you play with when you were growing up?

Ruth 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 on your privacy; if anybody built a house nearer than 500 feet that was an offense practically. 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 ever. 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 people. And I think that was conducive to imaginative living because they had companions with their little make believe friends. I don't know who is the loser or the winner in that situation but I know I was far from unhappy and never bored. If you had that much ground, a good plot of land, first of all there's things to do – you have a barn, 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. I would bash 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. I would spend hours looking at clover and making clover bouquets and eating sour grass. Do you know what sour grass is?

D. Heinlan: Yes.

Ruth Eby: Good for you. That's good, it has little red berries in it and I used eat it. And I can't remember ever being bored. I often hear children say, "I don't know what to do, I haven't anything to do." But in rural living there is 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 around 1910 we had moved to this corner of Rector and Middlesex, across from the Episcopal Church, waking in the morning and looking out my bedroom window this way over to Daniel's Hill and seeing the sun come up. There were no houses. This is the difference between then and now. When you looked you looked far to a horizon, not into somebody's yard. And every morning I would see the sun come up over Daniel's Hill and there would be what seemed like thousands, literally thousands of birds chirping. Now it is true, I do hear birds yet. But not in the quantities, it used to seem like the whole sky was vibrating with the bird's exuberance, exuberant music in the 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 things like the sunsets from where we lived looking down Middlesex Avenue, and my mother reading to me. One time I had a toothache, I must have been about four or five, and she held me on her lap and read to me from *The 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 and 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, the 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.

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 might still be rural life 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. Heinlan: Well I think this has been pretty good for our first try and I know I haven't talked very much because ...

Ruth Eby: Because I wouldn't let you!

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

Ruth Eby: Was it Forepaugh's; was that the name of the man, Forepaugh's Carnival? F-o-r-e -p-a-u-g-h?

D. Heinlan: I don't know, I don't recall. But that was a strange carnival, very interesting.

Ruth Eby: They'll all strange aren't they? 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 a field - looking over to the Plainfield Watchung Hills and thinking, "Isn't this exciting, there are mountains. And if I could get over that mountain I could see farther." And everyday later on, this was about 1914, went I went on the train to Trenton to go to Normal School, I would have a rendezvous with those mountains. Because outside of the New Brunswick station there was a certain track you could look across and see the Watchung Mountains in back of North Plainfield. And I would think there is beauty for the day; I'll hold that for the day. I don't like this going to Normal School but I do see the mountains every day. So that was a big thing to see 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. Heinlan: Yes, I was always glad of that. Did you ever go to the sea, Mrs. Eby, when you were growing up?

Ruth Eby: Well no, because that was too far. We did have a Sunday School picnic every year but we only got as far as Boynton Beach, do you know where that is? We went in a stage coach. I think we had two stagecoaches for the entire Reformed Church congregation and each stagecoach had four horses. 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 they had bathhouses and you could go swimming in this mud-hole, an absolute MUD-HOLE of a beach! It was nothing but the Arthur Kill with the Perth Amboy sewage in it but we went once a year and had a gorgeous time. But I don't remember going to the ocean until I was in my twenties.

But of course there were no cars and it was a totally different world. No cars, no radio, of course no television, no movies. So what did one do except make up your own stories. It was a far more creative world. You see there were no sources of outside entertainment, one created them. I would say that people played 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. We were pretty tied down. But it was a 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 was run by a man named Van Kirk who was our principal. 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 side and no one dared look across even that terrific boundary. And an old man named Green was the caretaker or landscaper. Girls 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 teachers. A woman name Flanagan, Miss Flanagan read to us every morning a story after our morning prayers, and 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 that first day that she read. She was such a beautiful interpreter. She was a fine, fine teacher and demon for discipline, a demon! People were in terror of her but see the memorable gift she gave to us. I know there are still teachers like that but I'm very thankful to have had her for my first teacher. So those things had a great influence on me.

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 seven years. But one night after seven years sobriety he went downtown on a Saturday 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, “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 down 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 was the 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 had the drug store on the corner there for sixty years. And people used to say to him when he was younger, “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 in life comes in my front door of my drug store everyday.” So that’s Metuchen for you.

D. Heinlan: I just started going up and down Main Street myself and I see a lot of life going on.

Ruth Eby: I believe it.

By the way, did you know that the man who runs hardware store, Metuchen Hardware Store...

D. Heinlan: Wernik?

Ruth Eby: No, not Wernik, he’s the druggist. 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. Heinlan: Yes it is.

Ruth Eby: Oh, well, no. But this is such a beautiful story. He can be pretty snippy 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 a kidney ailment and he went down to Carolina and had his kidney taken out and transplanted to his brother and they are both doing well. Isn’t that a sweet story? He’s a real fine man to do that.

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

Ruth Eby: Well now we've come up to about World War I and I don't think of anything else that I think would be of interest to outsiders or to other people, other than personal friends I don't remember too much more. The Fourth of July parades?

D. Heinlan: What about them?

Ruth Eby: They were big deals. Every house had bunting around their porch. And up in the park, Woodwild Park was a grandstand and we had a speaker, a state senator or someone of prominence. Very often it was Dr. Mason, who was the Presbyterian minister for several years, who would make a speech. And one year we even had a band. They played *Poet and Peasant* and what's that other old song... *Glow-worm*. Oh, we thought it was the latest thing! And then at night we had 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 and then we'd be so exhausted we'd go home at night and have ice cream and cake. That was a very big day, the Fourth of July.

D. Heinlan: Okay, well I guess I don't have any questions to ask you that I can think of. Was your husband a Metuchenite?

Ruth Eby: No, he was Canadian. I had some beaux - two or three steady beaux. 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 any of you." So it turned out that he did get to be famous and he did not have anything to do with any of us! 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 rents with World War I, people went off. Now in World War I, Sandy, there were things that were significant but it's rather long and I think we've taken up enough space here. However I will mention that a company of soldiers were billeted here in Metuchen for, I think, over a year. And they came right up here in this backyard, right up here where **Rudin's** live. Every night when we'd go to sleep we'd hear taps blowing at 10 o'clock. A lot of the boys got to be friendly and would go all over in town. And one morning like the gypsies, suddenly a fife and drum was coming through Rector Street, they were marching off. They made the square corner and they went marching off. 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. Heinlan: I'm not sure.

Ruth 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 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 munitions plant in South Amboy blew up and it was an earth-shaking noise, believe me! It sounded as if the universe was blowing up. You cannot imagine such a sound if you haven't heard it. So that day was kind of a shake-up to our lifestyle.

And also those boys going off and all being killed really 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. As my grandson said, he was "totaled" - in the present jargon.

I guess that's about it, Sandy.

D. Heinlan: Okay, thanks very much.

Ruth Eby: Oh, you're welcome. It's been a pleasure.