

Eleanor Bloomfield

Date: July 20, 1978

Interviewer: Paula Bruno

Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, February 2006 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, February 2019

Editor: Jennifer Warren, October 2019

Abstract: Eleanor M. Bloomfield (1904-1981) was the daughter of Howard Weston Bloomfield and Anita Irene (Lundy) Bloomfield, and the granddaughter of Charles A. Bloomfield, a prominent clay merchant. The Bloomfields are descendants of early New Jersey settlers. Ms. Bloomfield grew up in her grandfather's large home on Amboy Avenue (near Woodbridge Avenue) in the Clara Barton section of Edison, and attended Franklin School in Metuchen. Her parents were politically active and were members of the Metuchen Club. Ms. Bloomfield attended Trenton Normal School, New York University, and was a teacher in the Newark school system for many years.

In this interview, Ms. Bloomfield discusses her early upbringing in the Metuchen school system as well as her participation in local social clubs. Other topics she reminisces about are the Metuchen trolley, the monument for Trumbull Marshall, the Morgan Munitions Depot explosion in 1918, the local museum owned by Jack Connor, and her friendship with Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Disclaimer: Please note that all oral histories presented by the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society are unaltered. The language, comments, and thoughts contained therein are solely those of the individuals interviewed. Our goal in presenting them is to make the personal recollections of these individuals available, to be considered within both their historical context, and during the time the comments were made, as a part of the historical record. The content and language of these interviews should not in any way be attributed to any of the past, current, or future members of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society Board of Directors, or to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society membership as a whole.

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

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

E. Bloomfield: Well my ancestors in this area date many, many years back. The original Bloomfields of New Jersey received a grant of land from Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret, and I was brought up on the very land that they received. It was about two miles—two and a half possibly—from Metuchen, and was a very ideal location in some respects. However, I feel that Metuchen has been, and was my home since I was in Metuchen practically every day, all day and went home to sleep. This could be explained by the fact that I went to school in Metuchen always. I went to a private school. Would you like me [unclear] about it?

P. Bruno: Sure.

E. Bloomfield: Miss [Irene] Mason [daughter of Rev. James G. Mason] on Woodbridge Avenue conducted a kindergarten, and that was my first sight of a school. I think I was

three years old, possibly nearly four. There were a number of Metuchen people there. I can't remember all of the names, but I do remember Isabelle Rolfe, Mildred Clarkson, and DuBois Thompson were students, or rather kindergartners, perhaps I should say. And I think we did a great deal of building with blocks and constructing with sticks, and happy was the day when they brought in some books.

Next year, Miss Mason did not conduct the school. It moved to rooms near the Kramer Department Store [at 441 Main Street] and it was conducted by a Miss Grace Martin and Miss Lily Campbell, daughter of Alexander Campbell of Metuchen. Here there were five grades and I met a number of my very good friends, even to this day: Annis (Dolph) Mayes was one, and Anna Kriehall [phonetic] was another, Charlotte Hebbard, with whom I correspond regularly, was a third, and many more, some of whose names slip my mind at the moment.

Then my transfer was to Metuchen schools for which I cannot say enough. Metuchen High School was the most perfect training, I think, for future life—college or higher education of any type. The faculty members were all intelligent, carefully selected, personable, so interested. This was probably because Mr. Thomas G. Van Kirk, the principal, was so keen to have every one of us realize his or her potential. And he spent a great deal of time thinking of what teacher would be the best for the school, and I think he always managed to get the best. I cannot say enough in praise of Metuchen High. It might be interesting to know that while I was there, we had a literary magazine called *School Light*, which I don't think is in existence now. Also while I was there, the first school annual [yearbook] *The Blue Letter*—rather a feeble attempt when you compare it with the annuals of today—was produced. That must have been around about 1922, and I think there has been an annual ever since.

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

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

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

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

P. Bruno: And then did you go to college afterward?

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

P. Bruno: You were an English teacher? What did you teach?

E. Bloomfield: I taught English. For a brief time, I taught English and history. I had two majors, they were English and history. That was in junior high. Then, when I transferred to senior high, I taught English. Then rather unexpectedly was asked to be

counselor for two periods a day and teach English, which I did. And within a few years I took the examination for department head and was a very fortunate person in that very few women ever aspired to a position of that type. So I feel that I was fortunate in receiving my placement, and right in my own school, which I feel [unclear].

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

E. Bloomfield: You may be interested to know that, while I was in high school, we had a Service Club. It was located on [267] Amboy Avenue, near Main Street, in the home—formerly the home of Howard Campbell whose children many of you must know: Theodore, Irving, Irene, Louella. The club I believe was open every night, but there was a dance once a week. These dances, as well as the privilege of going in—reading, writing and so forth—were presided over by one of the organizations in town. So of course, when dance night came, the parents in charge saw that their daughters were there and their daughter’s friends. Everything was very, very nicely run. The boys seemed to enjoy it so much, and the girls had a great dignity, and yet they enjoyed every minute of it.

I think I might add in that respect that there was a very large dance, given after the World War I was over, in the Metuchen High School auditorium. We had, I think, Miss Krupsi [phonetic], who had one of the dancing classes—and I’ll speak of them later—conducted it for the wounded servicemen at the Menlo Park Rehabilitation Center. And that was a tremendous affair. The men were brought in by buses and you would just feel they had had no pleasure really, for ages. It was a privilege to be there. And our parents said the same thing, that they just couldn’t imagine a group having a better time.

I did mention the dancing classes. I think my first dancing class was when I was about six, in the afternoon at the Metuchen Club, which was located then on [483] Middlesex Avenue, conducted by a Miss Edwards. I seem to remember an accordion-pleated skirt. We had to come in and curtsey very, very formally. The next dancing class, that I recall, was conducted by Miss Edith Crehore in her home on Amboy Avenue. That, too, was in the afternoon, and all the people I knew were there, many whose names I won’t remember. But I know that Dolly (Prickitt) Buchanan and Annis (Dolph) Mayes and Cecelia (Schenck) Janke, and many, many more enjoyed many happy afternoons learning to do the Lulu Fada.

P. Bruno: What was that?

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

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

E. Bloomfield: We had a lot of fun, but I’m afraid I couldn’t demonstrate the Lulu Fada even now. Later Miss Krupsi [phonetic] had a dancing class in the evening at the Metuchen Club, and that was rather a big thing. Just about everybody went to that class. Later we had private lessons from a Mrs. Tunis, who had been a student of Irene and Vernon Castle [famous ballroom dancers]. Her husband had

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

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

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

Quite the reverse of clubs, I'd like to mention if I may, the shuttle. There was a little trolley that ran the length of Main Street, beginning up near Dolly (Prickitt) Buchanan's home on [76] Clive Street, and running down into south Metuchen to the very end of Main Street. At Main Street and Amboy Avenue, it of course connected with the main line trolley from New Brunswick to Perth Amboy. I think the big thing about the shuttle was Gene O'Hara, it's genial motorman. He would do anything for anybody. I believe he would put on a bottle of milk if he were asked to pick it up and somebody handed it to him, he'd hand it out as he went along. Rain or shine, snow or fair, the shuttle ran. And when the shuttle was taken off, I think Metuchen lost something.

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

P. Bruno: Sure.

E. Bloomfield: Well, [David] Trumbull Marshall who lived in Metuchen, and is one of its notable past citizens, was employed by the Edison Laboratories [in Menlo Park], as most people know, and very interested in lighting. Mr. Marshall organized the Edison Outing Club. Once a year, the entire club would come down to a woodland owned by my grandfather [Charles A. Bloomfield], which was behind the Grandview tract of land—now well built up—and have a chicken roast. And the chicken roast would last quite far into the evening and a very happy time was had by all. And they always said the chickens tasted better there than they could ever taste anywhere else.

One other thing about Mr. Marshall that you might be interested in hearing is, my grandfather had a huge boulder moved to the highest point of the Grandview tract. It was engraved with Trumbull Marshall's name and his achievements and so forth. Quite a ceremony was held; there were a great many people there with speakers and songs and so forth. Suddenly, after I was teaching, I came home one day and was sort of wandering around. The place was building up then and I said, "Where is the Trumbull Marshall Monument?" Well nobody seemed to know. We couldn't locate it anywhere. Years later, Mabel Dunham Smith, also a descendent of an old family, said that someone had told her who lived on the Grandview tract that they had bought a piece of land with a huge boulder and they were unable to move it. They just couldn't get it moved. And so they built their house around it. So that is where the monument is now. Now that was a

slip-up on my grandfather's part, because he had intended to leave the monument and the land around it to Raritan Township, which is now Edison, for a little park commemorating the wonderful things that Trumbull Marshall had done in the line of science.

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

E. Bloomfield: No, I don't and I don't think she knew who the owner was, but she was with a group and they were talking and this woman told this experience and later she asked some of her friends and they said they didn't know who she was. Now in mind with that, which was at the Grandview Height, I might mention the St. Peter's Cadets from Perth Amboy always camped every summer in the woodland, not too far from where the chicken roasts were held. You could locate the spot, more or less, by the old tanks, water tanks, which I think must surely still be there. But under the leadership of Mr. Mulcahy, they certainly had a wonderful time and learned so much about nature and so much about camping. And then, every year they came down and serenaded my grandmother [Mary Andrews Bloomfield], finally being invited right into the house where she played the piano and they all sang. Refreshments were served.

And going over things that had happened, I wondered if you would like to hear about the Morgan's explosion¹?

P. Bruno: Yes.

E. Bloomfield: This was probably the most exciting, well horrible experience that any of us ever had. Coinciding with the Morgan's explosion [on October 4, 1918] was the awful epidemic of Spanish flu—Spanish influenza, which had taken so many, many lives. There was hardly a home that didn't have one to five people ill. In my own home, we had three: one recovered, two ill, and one hospitalized. And my grandfather Mundy², who lived on Amboy Avenue between Home Street and Main Street, was also ill. We heard this terrible blast in the early evening of a fall night. Now this must have been around about 1920, I think. And the blast was so terrific that the glass went right out of a number of windows right then. In about eight minutes, there was another and they continued through the night. My father got in the car and drove down to try and find out where it was and what was happening. We found it was at Morgan's where there was a great deal of ammunition stored. They said it looked very serious, but they thought that they had gotten it under control, and so they had come home. But they were wrong, it wasn't under control and we were just simply frightened to death when, about two o'clock in the morning, such a blast that the rest of the glass that hadn't gone, went. And we went out of the house as fast as we could go, bringing our ill people out on cots or anything we could find that was light enough to carry.

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

E. Bloomfield: Well we were—this is just a guess—I imagine it would be about ten miles.

¹ Explosion of the T.A. Gillespie Company Shell Loading Plant, sometimes called the Morgan Munitions Depot in South Amboy, on October 4, 1918.

² She possibly means William L. Lundy, her grandfather, who lived at 241 Amboy Avenue.

P. Bruno: Oh wow.

E. Bloomfield: And of course, we were two miles from Metuchen. But Metuchen was almost as close as we were, as the crow would fly. And so at any rate, in the morning, word went through from Camp Raritan—later called the Raritan Arsenal—that Metuchen would certainly be devastated, and everybody should leave. Well, since so many people had people home who were ill, the answer is very few people left. And unfortunately, or rather very fortunately, a plane went over and dropped an explosive on a dam, breaking the dam and flooding the magazines. And the horrible explosion that they expected never took place. So, I think that that is something that upset people. I heard people had to be in shell shock from it, of falling and not knowing why, and the doctors had diagnosed it as shell shock.

P. Bruno: From the Morgan explosion?

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

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

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

P. Bruno: How about Jack [John] Connor's private museum?

E. Bloomfield: Oh yes. Probably no one knows about that. Jack Connor was a very interesting young man who was a teller in Metuchen National Bank. He had a home—large home on Main Street—I'm sorry, on Middlesex Avenue³ in the vicinity of Mrs. [Sarah] Coerr's [at 300 Middlesex Avenue] and Mrs. [Hattie] Corbin's home [at 224 Middlesex Avenue]. Near it he built a huge—I suppose it was constructed of cement, I'm not sure—building, which was to house a museum. And he, single-handed, went out and collected things of historical interest for this museum and it was utterly fascinating. I would have known nothing about it, really, except that one day I saw him downtown and he said, "Why don't you bring one of your classes out to my museum?" I said, "Oh, I'd be so afraid something might vanish. I couldn't watch them so carefully and there wouldn't be others to help me. But I'll do it if I can find another teacher to come with me, since you do insist." So we chartered buses and came out. I brought my best class and we had a wonderful visit and saw the most interesting things. And it just broke me up when I heard that the museum had closed, and I think it's been torn down.

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

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

P. Bruno: Did he collect these on his own? Or did he have help?

³ The Connor house faced Middlesex Avenue, but its official address was 279 (East) Chestnut Avenue.

E. Bloomfield: I think he did. I don't think he had a scout going out. But I suppose people who knew him well, when they saw things that he would like, would either get it and bring it to him or else tell him where he could get it. I think that people can be very helpful to one another.

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

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

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

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

P. Bruno: I read part of her book.

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

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

E. Bloomfield: Well that I haven't heard about, but I do have *Memories of 80 Years* at home, and I know that she was very devoted to her son-in-law because he had been so kind to her. I also remember in one of the private schools—the one conducted by Miss Martin and Miss Lily Campbell—we went out to the Dinwiddie farm so we would know what farm life was like, and we each came home with an egg, which I thought was rather cute.

Do you have any questions you'd like to ask about?

P. Bruno: Just getting back to Mary Wilkins Freeman a minute. Was your mother friends with her?

E. Bloomfield: Oh, very friendly. All the family were friendly. Her husband had some relatives that lived on—I'm trying to think—Route 27. Up where the bridge goes into Route 27, near the Ford Plant [along Route 1 South in Edison], before you come to the Ford Plant. And there were three sisters: Sally, Gussie and Jane Freeman. I think Jane was the oldest. And the family was very friendly with them, and there was a relationship between them; I'm not sure how close, it may have been close. And Dr. [Charles Manning] Freeman was the husband of Mary Wilkins Freeman. I suppose that Mrs. Buchanan spoke about the Volkmar Pottery?

P. Bruno: Just a little bit.

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

P. Bruno: Do you have any pieces?

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

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

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

[END OF INTERVIEW]