

Interviewee: Mr. Paul Fenton
Interviewers: Ruth Terwilliger and Martin Jessen
Recorded: December 17, 1974 in Metuchen, New Jersey
Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

R. Terwilliger: Mr. Paul Fenton's home to do an oral taping of his life history in Metuchen. I am very pleased this evening to have as my companion interviewer Martin Jessen, who is chairman of our local Historical Commission and also a lifelong resident of Metuchen. I would like mention that today's date is December 17, 1974 and that Mr. Fenton's home is at 368 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen.

Mr. Fenton, lets talk about your father's move to Metuchen and his assignment to St. Luke's Church. Perhaps you could tell us about what year that was and what the atmosphere in Metuchen was like at that time.

Mr. Fenton: That was the beginning of a 31-year tenure of the St. Luke's Church. My father had no previous contacts with the town except it was one of the places he remarked that he when used to take the train to New York you came into town and passed a cemetery and when you left the town you passed another cemetery.

Also he had been told that in college that the glacier had stopped in Metuchen. Curiously enough the same man who told him that, told me that. We were talking with and I understand that's on the Rutgers University field trips for the geology group.

My father finally came here by assignment and they used the term euphemistically as "being called". Actually the bishop has a lot to do with it. I think he came to this town because he was a low-key pastor and I think he would be at home; they said he would be at home in this town which it turned out he was.

My mother who came from Worcester had a little closer tie-in with the town because her mother, who was named Adams, belonged to people living in Portsmouth. As you know Portsmouth is near Kittery, Maine and the Piscataqua River flows through that. Apparently a group of people from that town left Piscataqua to come down to this area, hence the name Piscataway. And included in that group of people was one of her ancestors and she was quite interested to arrive here and find out she did have a tie-in with the community.

Apropos of talking with you about this so-called lifestyle and the way of life, two or three weeks ago I saw a picture of a bunch of Yalies taking the train up to the Yale Harvard football game which meant they were attending the game by train. My father recalls going up to the Princeton Harvard game in 1887 where he stopped off to see my mother and the only thing different about the way of life was that the ticket cost 50 cents and the souvenir button cost 25 cents.

But getting back to Metuchen, it was a congenial community. He was a low-key operator you might say. At the same time he was active in civic affairs, he was Chairman of the Red Cross, an overseer of the poor, he was a Three Minuteman and a Chaplain at Camp Dix. As evidence of this so called empathy, despite the fact that he was rather frail, he addressed a high school football rally – he was asked to address that – the year in which he retired. So that in a secular sense indicates the climate he came to which, as I said, was congenial for both sides.

R. Terwilliger: Mr. Fenton, may I intercede a moment by asking you now – let's talk a little bit about the family itself. It was your mother and father, yourself and you had a brother?

Mr. Fenton: I had a brother.

R. Terwilliger: A brother and any sisters?

Mr. Fenton: One sister.

R. Terwilliger: And one sister. So it was a family of five.

Mr. Fenton: That's right.

R. Terwilliger: That came to Metuchen.

Mr. Fenton: At that time it wasn't five.

R. Terwilliger: When you came to Metuchen how many were there?

Mr. Fenton: It was one – I was the one.

R. Terwilliger: You were the one. The other two were actually born here in Metuchen then. And how old were you then when you came here, about how old were you?

Mr. Fenton: Well within a few months of – it was 1899 or something, whatever it was.

R. Terwilliger: And where was the Parsonage then?

Mr. Fenton: The Parsonage was in an old mansard roof type houses which was quite indigenous to that particular era and of course although the Church is a masterpiece of architecture, that house was an anachronism in the sense that it was fifteen rooms and it was mostly unheated it seemed. So that was where that was, right there where the Education building is. Right now there is a Remembrance Garden, which has been recently installed and there is a Memorial Garden, which you probably noticed in the last six months. The house apparently stood just a few feet away from that. Which is to say that speaking from the cradle to the grave my journey from the cradle to the grave won't be too long if I end up in that Memorial Garden. So that's where it was and of course during Dr. Fryer's time that's where that was.

R. Terwilliger: Can I ask you something? Do you remember the day you moved here?

Mr. Fenton: No, I was only weeks old.

R. Terwilliger: Then can you tell me a little bit maybe about your first recollections of that house. The heating system or your room or parishioners or something about what you felt about this home and where you lived.

Mr. Fenton: That's easy because your remembrances come very, very quickly at that age. For instance I think the first recollection I had of the town basically was the Catholic Church, which is now celebrating its 100th anniversary. The church, which was almost a counterpart of St. Luke's, burned down. I think that was about 1903 or 04, I don't remember but it vaguely comes through. I suppose the first time I remember anything physically was a very severe hailstorm, which struck through this part of the country, and the stones were as big as golf balls and it apparently affected every window in the church. So that of course became very ingrained in my mind.

On the more tangible aspects, there are certain things that stand out and I've mentioned this a number of times. If you live in a rector's house you take a rather charitable view of people mostly because you heard nothing at home uncharitable. And when you did hear it, you might touch on it and it would be more in the form of an amusing anecdote. We weren't expected to set a good example.

R. Terwilliger: You *were not* expected to set a good example?

Mr. Fenton: We were expected to set a good example. We were expected and heaven help you if you set a bad one. That's the kind of feeling you have when one travels in Spain or Russia – the feeling that there are no rules until you break them. But you

know the reins; you have a built-in group of critics. I think that's probably more true for women, for the girls of clergymen. For instance, Josie _____, whose father was Anglican clergyman around Jersey, she and her father had a very fine rapport but despite all her bizarre life she went back to her father's church to be buried. So there is a relationship that is quite wholesome between the families of clergymen. But as I say you are a sitting duck and for that reason you have to know a little more about it than if you would be if you just somebody else when it comes along.

R. Terwilliger: Now was this a verbal understanding? I mean did your father talk to you children about these things, that you also represent the church or was it just an unspoken kind of a thing?

Mr. Fenton: That's right. In other words there are no rules until you broke them, and they were dealt with in a fairly mild sort of a way.

M. Jessen: What kind of heating system did you have in the building?

Mr. Fenton: We had a hot air heating system, which apparently was an outgrowth of the stove which went from room to room with flue openings at various levels. And of course it had a very – it had a rather pleasant use around Christmas time. Because what they would do is - Santa Claus, you see, would drop down one of those flues for somebody and he'd – well pretty soon your father who'd be out on the horse or whatever the case may be or something, would come in and you'd tell him all about it. And then after you'd get to be old enough to be more or less suspicious anyhow, you'd realize it was strange that he wasn't around. Then there was always a box of candy, which came down those flues, followed by which you'd put a cigar for Santa Claus. So there was a certain way of life built up around living in a publicized place. Getting back to heating that where the heat was.

M. Jessen: How about cooking?

Mr. Fenton: Well, the cooking was a coal range. You had to watch your steps when you came in the back stairs, which was ridiculous because there was no need for the back stairs but you had to walk softly to guard against the bread falling and so forth. And of course the plumbing was archaic. I mean it all went into a cesspool. A lot of people maintained well water.

M. Jessen: Did you have city water?

Mr. Fenton: City water, yes as far as I know at that time. The gas didn't come until later and the telephone of course came all in one fell swoop. But apparently the sewer line as you know didn't

come into the city until rather late for a community of this size. They didn't worry about the cosmetic aspect of it, they just were under pressure and they had to do it.

R. Terwilliger: Did your mother have help or did she run this parsonage herself?

Mr. Fenton: No, there was help. Two types of help, one in the kitchen and the other one was the one who lived in the barn. He had an apartment in the barn.

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember these people's names?

Mr. Fenton: This fellow, the one in the barn was born in Ireland and he was raised on the sea. And he would go on sabbaticals every so often and the first thing my father knew he would get a call from someplace where Frank was putting on the lights in the station and the station had been told to keep the lights down. He was a very salty character but I must admit I probably learned more from him than I did in Sunday School!

R. Terwilliger: Isn't that great?

Mr. Fenton: My brother was at *Mercersburg* at the time when I was just getting into the automobile competition and it got to be quite a game as to who was going to use to use the car and all the things we devised to keep my father from using the automobile.

And this fellow Frank was very heavy handed with the oil. And one time I remember we had an Opal, about a 1915 or 1916 Opal and he noticed the brake pads looked to him like they needed a shot of oil. So my father had to go somewhere in a hurry and came out of Oak Avenue onto Route 27. And those brake pads worked all right but they just added a fillip to the whole speed of the car.

So Frank was there and my brother used to enlist his help in taking care of the cars. One of the tricks we had was to take the spark plugs and put them together, you see. And of course Frank knew he saw one of us doing it so he found out how to do it too; so he wanted to see it work and he took a screwdriver and put his hand on the windshield frame and said, "Give it the gun!" We gave it gun and of course he got shock.

So apparently there was a man who of course if you put them all together... later on I put down the price that people got in those days so we could realize it was really a hardship.

M. Jessen: What were the roads like?

Mr. Fenton: Those were macadam roads. People who kept going on them would say they were not too good. They would be pot-marked and they would be the rough edge of a tooth, you know, there'd be ridges around it and frost would heave it, but they were solid. This was the old Morris Essex Turnpike.

M. Jessen: How about – was there much traffic on Route 27?

Mr. Fenton: That was the original Lincoln Highway. It was a consequence that it was the main artery listed in the travel books for California. There were times when the traffic was horrendous. You take a Princeton Yale football game and the only way they could come through to that would be through New Brunswick and through Metuchen over that bridge by Klein's Hotel and then at every stop light they had a man working on it. So that was part of the congestion and then of course a lot of people would just use it to go places. And they had Woodwild Park install one of these fountains, which still exists in principle. In fact, the Water Company is technically supposed to continue putting water in there all the time; the lower one for the dogs and the upper one for the horses, but the Stanley Steamers, you see, would come along. So that was stopping place for Stanley Steamers.

R. Terwilliger: This is the fountain that sits on the little island?

Mr. Fenton: So *Corban* went down and looked at and realized it didn't have a supply of water where it was so he suggested they move it back. It doesn't have water in it now.

R. Terwilliger: Right. But it was actually a horse trough and the lower one was for dogs? And there is something in back, was that for people?

Mr. Fenton: That was for people.

R. Terwilliger: That was for people in the back I want to get us back on our little outline here so we don't miss anything.

Mr. Fenton: Well I think you were talking about the church itself.

R. Terwilliger: Right, and church life. I would love to know more about your father. What kind of a minister was he? Was he the fire and brimstone?

Mr. Fenton: Oh no. He was anything but.

R. Terwilliger: Or was he a very gentle man?

Mr. Fenton: He went to Princeton and then he went to - he got a PhD at Columbia in public law. So essentially he was trained in law and his seminary work was probably upset by overlapping

courses and so forth. So he was essentially a scholar. All those years he'd been the chaplain at the diocese in New Jersey and as such he would be so completed as a scholar. So that was the basis in which he operated and I think that's why he fit in this community.

I think this is probably the time to mention that St. Luke's was junior to a lot of churches around there. In other words St Luke's was the last of the churches back in 1868. The Catholic Church, St. Francis is just a few a years behind. But the other ones have been in business for a long while, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Methodist and so forth. But the Episcopal group came out as part of – well they were people who came out to live in the country. They were city people; they were not people who grew up and were raised in Metuchen. Some of those names would ring a bell if you were going through the Times, I mean the Literary Times today. A lot of those people stayed in town and didn't go away and yet they were anything but bucolic, I mean they were very sophisticated people. When they had the 50th anniversary of St. Luke's Church in 1918 the only member on the original vestibule was Henry Mills Alden and you know that's a name that was well known. He was an Editor of Harper's Magazine and his son-in-law was George Kilmer and he was married in St. Luke's Church.

And then there was the Waite family, Captain Waite built the house where the Halleluiah is I think and Mrs. Mook lived. And a lot of those people have been in town. Mrs. Mook who is living now in Texas, her grandfather was on the original St. Luke's rectory. Many of the families go back and have a father or grandfather who was a member. And the Robins family lived practically across the street from the church and their father and grandfather was on the original, so there was continuity about it. And one of the men lived here, _____, who died at 93 not too long ago almost saw the whole church develop. It was a strange thing because the St. Luke's Church, the Metuchen Club, the Savings and Loan and Woodwild Park all seemed to be interlocking in terms of the people.

M. Jessen: Going back to the Robins; that's the Robins of Robin's Hall? And that's where Metuchen Hardware Store is today?

P. Fenton: That used to be Knudson's, and that's where they used to have the fireman's ball.

R. Terwilliger: Was that ever the Borough Hall too? Was that used as the Borough Hall?

P. Fenton: Yes, sure.

- R. Terwilliger: This is where Metuchen Hardware is now, that was Robins Hall.
- M. Jessen: Now also Robins had a hotel that was up on Inn Place?
- P. Fenton: It was close to there; I think they called it Hillside Inn. It was set back up on the hill. And if you go up there now on the top of the hill you can look all over the whole town. And that's where it was and in fact people used to stay there like at the Metuchen Inn on Middlesex Avenue.**
- R. Terwilliger: Are you talking now behind the National Bank – that hill? Ruegger's building is behind there.
- M. Jessen: Sort of back towards the railroad. People came from New York City and stayed during the summer, it was like a summer resort.
- P. Fenton: Periodically when they were waiting for their house to be built they would stay at the inn. I know John McLaughlin and when they came out to build a house, they would stay at the inn and then they would go along and keep track of the contractor while he was building the house. While they built the house they would put a branch on the top of the roof part.**
- M. Jessen: So they'd have good luck.
- P. Fenton: Yes.**
- M. Jessen: You mentioned the Savings and Loan. The Savings and Loan took part in developing this area around Woodwild Park. And then a lot of those lots were sold to people from New York City.
- P. Fenton: Yes, maybe a little later I can tie those in with my talk but that is a peculiar organization and the whole history of that savings and loan revolves around that particular tract.**
- R. Terwilliger: Well let's not skip too far ahead though because I am interested and I'm sure anyone who listens to the tape will be interested in hearing a little bit about family life as the Parson's son in Metuchen? Did it have a theme of any kind, did spring mean church picnic?
- P. Fenton: Well, now you're talking of the whole mores of the day, in other words, the whole community was integrated. In other words, when you had a Pinafore, everybody went to the opera. If you had a Fireman's Ball, everybody went to the Fireman's Ball. If you had a Strawberry Festival everybody would go and bring their own strawberries. There was no question. And they had a Dancer's School - everybody went to Dancer's School and a Glee Club.**

R. Terwilliger: So this is not just church oriented you're talking about, this is town oriented in other words.

P. Fenton: There were certain things that were ambivalent like for instance, they had a baseball league made up of churches. We needed competition. I mean _____ who died a while ago was a very good ball player. And Wesley Clarkson who was a very famous hockey player was a good athlete so they had certain competition along those lines. And they had a social life for the people who had been here a good many years and had gotten established with other members of the community and they formed The Metuchen Club.

R. Terwilliger: You mentioned that when I interviewed you. What was the Metuchen Club?

P. Fenton: The Metuchen Club was the outgrowth of the building which is down there now, the Masonic Hall; that's the location in those days – and I have pictures – the Metuchen Club burned down. They would use that club for all sorts of dances. They would use the bowling alley and the roof of the bowling alley acted as a bandstand for the tennis courts.

R. Terwilliger: What were the surroundings like around that building – there weren't any houses built around there?

P. Fenton: The houses were on the other side of Middlesex Avenue. You see two houses took up that whole section. First there was a house that was burned down and then there was the one that is now up on Chestnut Avenue. There were only two houses on that side of the street.

R. Terwilliger: The old Mook house?

P. Fenton: The BIL was there and the Garage and that was the end of the line. But the activities, they had things once a week.

R. Terwilliger: Did someone actually run this?

P. Fenton: Just a community hall and they had free dances.

R. Terwilliger: But this was kind of a community center, a social center of the town?

P. Fenton: Social in the sense that it was by membership. It wasn't conducted for profit. They had all sorts of things that would seem incongruous to a nice little town. For instance there was a racetrack between here and Plainfield. And they used to have some pretty hot races out there, now the gambling I don't know about but I imagine there was. It must have been.

M. Jessen: You're talking about the one on the other side of the Reading railroad?

R. Terwilliger: This is horse racing you're talking about?

P. Fenton: Yes. Oh I know there were minstrels, you see those were the days when there were minstrels.