

Frances Hansen

Date: January 21, 1992
Interviewer: Unidentified (called Ida during interview)
Transcriber: Jennifer Warren, June 2020
Editor: Jennifer Warren, August 2020

Abstract: Frances Mabel (Tucker) Hansen (1919-2004) was the daughter of Edwin W. Tucker and Mabel (Bencraft) Tucker. Born in Arlington, New Jersey, Ms. Hansen grew up in Metuchen with her family that included four older brothers at 28 Plainfield Avenue. Her father was sales engineer for Nixon Nitration Works and a member of the Metuchen Golf and Country Club. Ms. Hansen graduated from Metuchen High School in 1936 and later married Ernest R. Hansen (1909-1983), the president and chairman of the Perth Amboy Savings Institution and the Perth Amboy General Hospital. The couple had two sons: Warren and John. They originally settled in Woodbridge before moving back to Metuchen in 1947 and living along Home Street.

Ms. Hansen was a literary mind who published original limericks and poems in *Good Housekeeping* and other publications. She taught herself how to construct crossword puzzles after discovering that her church friends were addicted to the Sunday puzzles, and her poems and limericks were often included as clues in her puzzles. She submitted her first puzzle to *The New York Times* and was rejected for common mistakes, like using two-letter words and having a high word count. Her revised puzzle was published in December 1964 and she continued this practice until her death. Ms. Hansen constructed crossword puzzles for numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and book publishers like Dell, Random House, the Crossword Club, and Simon & Schuster. At the time of her death, she had become the second most prolific living writer of Sunday puzzles and the fourth-most published of all time for *The New York Times*. She was also a life-long member of the St. Luke's Episcopal Church where she taught at the Sunday school. Ms. Hansen is buried with her husband at Hillside Cemetery.

In this interview, Ms. Hansen talks extensively about her family, growing up in Metuchen, her education and marriage, and her extracurricular activities that included a career as a crossword puzzle constructor. She also shares her recollections of the town that involve the trolley, life during the Depression, the Forum Theatre, Main Street businesses including Costa's Ice Cream Company, and recreational activities.

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Interviewer: Today is Tuesday, January 21, 1992 and this will be some folk reminiscences, folk history of Frances Hansen from Metuchen. [recording paused]

F. Hansen: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... reminisce very much, I'd rather listen to them. And besides, some of them make me sad.

Interviewer: Well, one of the things I say right off the bat is don't say anything you don't want to say. Don't say anything that's personal that you don't want anybody else to hear. [chuckles] But really we're talking about—what was it like to live in 1920?

F. Hansen: Well, I was born in 1919, as I had the four older brothers. And I was the only girl, so I suppose I was spoiled. Everybody said, "Oh, you must be so spoiled." They're probably right. And always lived in Metuchen. So I don't have any recollection of city life or anything like that, just small town in Metuchen [which] was much smaller then than it is now.

Interviewer: It must have been very different then than it is now.

F. Hansen: Much, much. Main Street was all dirt. There was a trolley that went down Main Street. Yes, you could go downtown and you could say hello to everybody. You knew everybody.

Interviewer: [loud noises from moving tape recorder] I'm getting you, okay, yeah. Okay, that's all right.

F. Hansen: Well anyhow, I don't really—

Interviewer: But that was interesting. Now did that trolley line run down Amboy Avenue?

F. Hansen: Well, I know it came up from Bonhamtown. And I think it came from Perth Amboy. And then came—where it stopped was on the corner of—it would go right through town and stop on the corner of Plainfield, where Main Street hits Plainfield Avenue, turn around and go back then. Now we lived on the corner of Main and Plainfield Avenue [at 28 Plainfield Avenue] and my mother [Mabel (Bencraft) Tucker] would have an arrangement with the trolley conductor and he would bring her out a loaf of bread every day. [laughter] And she would send one of the boys right down to the corner there and he would bring her down there. He would stop at the bakery in the middle of town to pick up the bread.

Interviewer: Isn't that a great favor?

F. Hansen: Can you imagine anybody doing that today? Can you imagine asking a conductor to stop and bring you something on the trolley? [laughter] But he did and then—well, and of course, I went to Metuchen schools.

Interviewer: Which of the schools did you go to?

F. Hansen: Well, I went to—there was only Edgar [Elementary School] and Franklin [High School] then. I'm trying to think if there were any other schools. No, there was just Edgar and Franklin. And I went to Edgar up to fourth grade and then over to Franklin and graduated from Franklin High School. And when I went to high school there, that was Depression. I graduated from high school in 1936 so those years of high school were all Depression years.

Interviewer: Yes.

F. Hansen: And all the schools around here had closed down. They couldn't afford to pay the teachers, and so they sent them all to Metuchen High. And we would have these buses come in with all the students from Piscataway, they came, and Iselin, and Menlo Park, and Dunellen, and the whole area around here all came to Metuchen because you could still pay the teachers.

Interviewer: That was the Franklin School then?

F. Hansen: And that was at Franklin School, and they came in from the [Raritan] Arsenal too. And the buses would come in. We did not associate with the ones that came in too much because the buses would bring them in in the morning just in time for school. And they would be waiting for them as soon as school finished, so we didn't really have too much to do. You know you didn't make fast friends with any of them because you didn't see them that much. They would come and go. So mostly the Metuchenites stuck together and I suppose the ones that rode on the bus, that's how they made their friends. And when we have our class reunions, we have a large class reunion because we had such large classes with all these other kids added to them. And the teachers were doubled up teaching two or three subjects add to, you know, couldn't afford the pay any more teachers than that. And they cut out a lot of things: they cut out the cooking, they cut out what they call the "grills," cut out the cooking, cut out the sewing, cut out the music. And then what surprised me, they cut out the manual training, which I think was probably not a very good idea because a lot of those boys that were not equipped to do anything else could at least, if they took the manual training, could at least learn to go in to do carpentry or something like that.

Interviewer: That's right. And it could have helped them in their own lives.

F. Hansen: It could have helped them get started. Yeah, I was surprised at that. But they did. They cut things down to a bare minimum. But they were not—as far as I was concerned, they were—even though it was Depression—they were very happy years. We had a large family. And my mother was very hospitable; she was English, but she had lived enough years in the South so that she had adopted the Southern hospitality and the house was always open. And of course, with all of us, with the five children, it was always just filled, always just filled with people.

Interviewer: What was your maiden name?

F. Hansen: Tucker. T-u-c-k-e-r. And Cam was surprised when he went to London [United Kingdom], and he was looking in the telephone book for something. And he found Tucker, Tucker, Tucker, Tucker, Tucker, Tucker! [laughs] Lots of Tuckers! And it's also a big name because my father's family, he was Edwin Carter Weed Tucker and his family—well, they were Scottish originally. But around 1600 or something, they turned to America. And first they went to Bermuda, and Bermuda there's even a Tucker's Town there. They say Bermuda is noted for Tuckers and onions. [laughter] And lots of Tuckers! And then the Tuckers went over to Florida and to Virginia, and went to two separate places. So anyhow, what we did—although we didn't see too much of the Depression as the big city would, there were no bread lines, things like that. What you did see, you saw miniature golf courses springing up on everybody's vacant lawn. You could dig a few holes and put some hazards in, and they'd charge ten cents or

fifteen cents. They had their own miniature golf. You saw them all over Metuchen, these miniature golf courses.

Interviewer: So you had a truck on street from yours setting up—?

F. Hansen: Yes! Well anything, you know, people were bored. They'd get anything to try to make a dollar. We were not affected because my father-in-law was worth—if you had a job during the Depression, it wasn't bad at all. But that was the most obvious sign, and then we didn't—of course we had no TV [television], which would have been a help during the Depression too. And my grandmother [Fannie Bencraft] lived with us too. And she'd like to go to the movies. So we would go to the movies; the movies were a quarter.

Interviewer: Did they have the Forum [Theatre at 314-316 Main Street] at that time?

F. Hansen: The Forum, I first knew the Forum, it was down on the corner of Hillside [Avenue] and Main where you remember—I don't know whether you remember that there was an old Acme [Supermarket] there?

Interviewer: Yes, I do.

F. Hansen: There was an old Acme on that corner. Well before that, long time ago, that was the Forum [Metuchen Theatre at 460 Main Street]. And then Jimmy Forgione built this one over here [at 314-316 Main Street]. And I would say he built that somewhere in the—oh, probably it was there in the thirties when I was in high school. So he probably built it, maybe 1930¹, somewhere around there. I know it was there when I was in high school.

And we also had great games of Monopoly [board game]. They do say that people during the Depression just loved to handle all this money even though it was pretend money. And that was the reason for the popularity of Monopoly. But we had always enough to make it good. And I still can picture us, all this money, all over the table, all the time, somebody busily being the banker counting out the money. And my grandmother would love to play with us and turned out to be quite a shrewd realtor. [laughs] And we played that a lot, and we also played bridge [trick-taking card game] all the time because there was always enough for a bridge game. And my mother and father just loved bridge. My grandmother, of course being English, she had grown up on whist [trick-taking card game]. Whist is very similar to bridge, so she picked up bridge very easily. I know I was playing bridge before I was ten years old. And in those days, then it was auction bridge. You play auction bridge and when contract came, it was switched to contract bridge. I haven't played now in—oh my goodness—when our last bridge couple that we used to play with regularly, when they left? Penny and I just didn't play bridge anymore. And now I think it would be—I don't know whether I could pick it up again or not, pick up the fine points. But that, at that time, that was a great, great occupation. So there were a lot of things that we did that were fun. And just having all those people in the house was enough fun anyway. You know we had great ping pong going all the time. We all loved to play ping pong. I

¹ The Forum Theatre at 314-316 Main Street was opened in 1928, replacing the Metuchen Theatre at 460 Main Street. The theater was named after James C. Forgione, manager of the theatre, and H. A. Rumler, president of the Metuchen Amusement Corporation that was responsible for the construction of the new theater.

didn't see too much of my oldest brother [Edwin W. Tucker Jr.]. He moved in another strata; he was way up there above the kid sister. He would pat me on the head, that's all I remember. He would pat me on the head now and then, very brotherly.

So then I graduated from high school. My father having come from Florida, he was insistent that I meet all the—be introduced to the Florida society as he knew it, remembered it. The Tuckers, they had had a cotton plantation, which was a modest salad farm. And then when the Civil War came along, of course that all broke up and the Tuckers dissipated to other areas, most of them going to Jacksonville, which was Florida's biggest city. So I had aunts and uncles in Jacksonville. So they sent me down there, and first I had to go to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and have my wardrobe—I had an aunt in Philadelphia and she was supposed to know everything that there was to know about clothes and fashion. And she was to supervise my wardrobe that I was to take down there. She did, spent two weeks down there assembling that. And then they put me on a Pullman [railroad sleeping car], and I went down to, was taken, put on this end and taken off the other end by my aunts and uncles. [coughs] And then led a very, very busy season. There were dances and tea parties and just all kinds of things that whole winter, just wonderful, just wonderful. And I had an elegant time and just enjoyed it, made friends down there really that I still have contact with a few of them. Most of those relatives now are died through old age, the old uncles and even the cousins are beginning to go.

[clears throat] But my voice is beginning to go too. Can I have some iced tea?

Interviewer: Of course, stop anytime you have to.

F. Hansen: [laughs] I'll just carry on, sound like the ancient [unclear].

Interviewer: But it's wonderful to hear that this is what used to happen. And this was the fall after you graduated from high school?

F. Hansen: It was right after I graduated. Well, now they send the girls onto college. But my father would never have sent me away to school unchaperoned, would have been unthought-of.

Interviewer: You would have had to send a companion with you then?

F. Hansen: When I was down in Florida, I had my aunts and uncles watching over me like hawks. A bit too much! But no, that he wouldn't have gone along with. He was southern and as far as a career for women, that was utterly—the only women that he knew were poor things whose husbands couldn't support them and very much to be pitied. That was what a working woman was, very much to be pitied. [laughs]

Interviewer: How things have changed?

F. Hansen: Yes, yes. "Husband couldn't support her, poor thing."

Interviewer: It was not the thing. A lady didn't go out and work.

F. Hansen: Oh gosh, no! And I think really—well, with schoolteachers now, I think they approved of schoolteachers. I think they thought that that was respectable. But otherwise, it was mostly that you were needy and just had to do it. The thought of a career for a woman never entered his mind.

Interviewer: So then a young woman at that time in his mind was expected to enter the social life and eventually marry?

F. Hansen: Oh yes, definitely. Marry, have children, and you know provide a nice home, bring up her children correctly. That was the most that was expected of her. [laughs]

Interviewer: He'd be certainly would get a big shock if he were—? [laughs]

F. Hansen: Oh, well, he would be shocked by a great many things! He was the old-school Southerner.

Interviewer: And you'd spend—what did you spend a year down there?

F. Hansen: Yes, I did. And then the next year, I spent almost as much time because—well, there was a big wedding that I went down for, and then after that, they begged me to stay some more. And I just had another—well, at that time—let me think now—I think it was around then that I met Ernie [Ernest R. Hansen, her husband]. Ernie always said that he first saw me on the golf course. And he said, “Well, I'll wait till she grows up.” [laughter] And at that time, I was about seventeen or something. [coughs] Of course, Ernie was ten years older. [coughs] And I guess seventeen did look a little young to him. So what he did, he came around just about that time too and wasn't too long that—we couldn't get, Daddy said no engagement, no marriage until he was—he had to make fifty dollars a week.

Interviewer: Oh, that much! [laughs]

F. Hansen: Fifty dollars. He had to make fifty dollars a week. Ernie was a [bank] teller then and eventually they did promote him to head teller and then he was making fifty dollars a week. But we were engaged, oh my goodness, about a year and a half before we were married. But then when he made the fifty dollars a week, then—and it was funny because—but of course, in those days that was not a bad—

Interviewer: That was a good salary.

F. Hansen: That was not bad for a young man. That was decent. [laughs] I think practically all them were making about that. Well anyhow, we did get married and we had a big wedding. Four hundred people came to the wedding; it was a big wedding. I had all my brother's wives as bridesmaids and then two of Ernie's sisters, plus my maid of honor. So we had this huge wedding.

Interviewer: Where did you—?

F. Hansen: In the church here. We were Episcopal.

Interviewer: At St. Luke's [Episcopal Church at 17 Oak Avenue]?

F. Hansen: At St. Luke's, yeah. Always been Episcopal.

Interviewer: And where was your reception?

F. Hansen: And then the reception, the only place big enough around here was The Pines [at 2085 Lincoln Highway, Edison].

Interviewer: Oh yes.

F. Hansen: So we could go to The Pines and just—as they say, with four hundred people, you had a mob scene. [laughs] Yeah, and it was a dinner for everybody too. A dinner and dancing afterwards. [coughs]

Interviewer: Anytime you want to stop, I can pause this.

F. Hansen: Okay.

Interviewer: Do you want to ... [recording paused]

F. Hansen: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... not entirely sure I would have liked her.

Interviewer: Well, she was strange. [laughter] I think most people are little on the—you know demented?

F. Hansen: Of course, she was an artist. You can't expect artists to act like normal people. I think she was a bit of a genius too and something not to be held accountable. And of course, she did marry that dreadful man, who was also a mad genius.

Well, where was I? Oh yeah, Ernie and I were getting married. So we got married and we bought a little house over in Woodbridge for \$4,900, of which he had to borrow a hundred from my father. [laughter] But we wanted to buy over here on Bounty [Street], but that was very expensive there. That house was \$6,000, which was out of sight. Out of sight, yeah. Just couldn't swing that one. So we bought this little house over in Woodbridge, and I had two babies there. And we were very happy there. It was a tiny house. And I remember [unclear] tree. Oh, you know what they say about the new bloom—oh, I'm sticky that and so clean—oh my goodness, wash the balls around them. [coughs] Forget it now! [laughter] Forget that one. But anyhow, the two boys and we really did need a bigger house and—

Interviewer: Let me go back for a minute to your early years in Metuchen. [coughing] You describe the town as a small and not nearly as populated as it is now.

F. Hansen: Oh no! No, you see they built in all the empty field.

Interviewer: What did Main Street look like?

F. Hansen: Pretty empty. Well, there was Kramer's [Department Store at 441 Main Street], which was, Kramer's would be—well, I don't think they—it would be in the area that the plaid shop was, in that area now. And then Morris Stores [at 413 Main Street], Morris [Zuts] grew a vegetable store called the California Fruit Market

on the other side of Main Street [at 428 Main Street]. That was before he went into the rag business. He had that and then—oh, there was a bank. That was the Commonwealth [Bank at 407 Main Street] on the—I'm trying to think—oh, the Metuchen Hardware [at 401 Main Street] was there. And there was a big sort of a seed house where Greg's Hardware [phonetic] is, big sort of a granary place [at 489 Main Street]. And then there was a little candy store, there was Perry's Candy Store, little Perry's Candy Store [at 405 Main Street]. Costa's was where Contessa's is now [at 416 Main Street] and Costa's was marvelous. He [Gregory Costa Sr.] and his wife [Matilda (Moglia) Costa], they ran—they had an ice cream company, but this was before he made a lot of money with that ice cream. And he had this, well, I would call it a soda fountain. And it smelled simply wonderful; it was the old-fashioned kind with the fans overhead and the wire, stools, and the marble counters. Oh, such a wonderful smell when you walked in there! And we would go down there after, this was when I was in high school, we would go down there practically every day and hang around in Costa's in one of the back booths over our nickel Cokes, never minded a bit. And then every Wednesday, he would make—he and his wife—his wife would always be behind the counter helping too. And he and his wife every Wednesday would make spaghetti dinner for twenty-five cents. And so you hoarded your pennies through the week and you went down to Costa's to get this twenty-five-cent spaghetti dinner, which was served with meatballs and Italian bread and coffee. [laughs] And that was the big deal every week, you go down to Costa's. Eventually he made quite a bit of money with that. Costa's Ice Cream was quite popular around here.

Interviewer: Yes. I remember they built that big plant in Woodbridge.

F. Hansen: Yes! Yes, they did. In those days, they had a little plant [at 16 Pearl Street] over here where Irma's Bag is [at 54 Pearl Street]. When it started getting more successful, then they would take the classes over there from school, you could give them all a little Costa Dixie cup. So he did very well with it. And I'm trying to think what else was on Main Street there.

Interviewer: Did you ever have a black population in Metuchen at that time? I know there was a southern part.

F. Hansen: The blacks were mostly on Durham Avenue. And I don't think they lived anywhere else in the area. I think that was to be contained there. Now, in the Episcopal Church, we had a black man who was—I guess you call him the sexton. He rang the bell. And he would take Communion, but he would wait until everybody else had had Communion, and then the very last one, he'd go up to the Communion table and have it all by himself. And that was considered the right thing for him to do.

Interviewer: Really?

F. Hansen: He never questioned it. [laughs]

Interviewer: Nor did anyone else?

F. Hansen: No! No, nobody did, no!

Interviewer: And were there black children in school?

F. Hansen: Oh yes, there were. And this, I remember that my uncle who came up from Florida and my dad dropped me off at the school. My uncle was in the car too and Uncle John turned to dad and said, “Oh, you let your daughter go to school with black children?!” And appalled, you know, just [unclear]. My father said, “Well, there isn’t any way to get around it.” [laughs] But he was absolutely horrified. Well, my mother had the black help; she was called Margaret, who stayed with us for years. Before Margaret, there had been a succession of—my aunt down in Florida would, my mother had petitioned her to send her somebody. So she would send up some black girl from down there, and my mother would keep her a couple weeks and then just say she was a field hand. She called them all field hands. And it is different to permanent—

Interviewer: Different from the house, house person.

F. Hansen: House jockey, yeah. But anyhow, she finally did find Margaret, who she was satisfied with. And Margaret was with us all through the years, who went and came just as she pleased. Nothing seemed to ruffle her. She was used to the boys having their big wars all over the house and people busting in. [chuckles] It didn’t bother her at all, which was one of the reasons that—my mother was the same way, nothing bothered her about people just coming in and staying. People came up from the South and stayed for weeks and weeks, and that was not questioned at all. You’re supposed to make long visits.

Interviewer: It reminds me of the stories I’ve read of English country homes where people would go to visit and stay.

F. Hansen: That is right. And that’s the way the Southerners do it too. Long visits! And expect you to come visit them for long visits too. It was just the way they did things then. I suppose probably because it wasn’t as easy to get places. You didn’t fly back and forth. We used to go down to Florida every year, but we went down by car. That was before the days of airplane travel, and my dad would ride down and he would have been down with which of the children, usually two of the children got to go. And we’d sort of take turns of who is to go to Florida with my mother and father.

Interviewer: Did your mother drive too?

F. Hansen: No, she didn’t. She had a good story to tell about that. She did try to drive. When the first cars came in, they were still at Tucker Hill. And Daddy had the first car then, you know the South. And so she got in it and she got it out of the driveway, and she drove it a hundred feet right into a pond that was at the bottom of a hill! [laughter] And she never got behind the wheel again. Never got behind the wheel again! No, she did not drive. She did not like to drive. Daddy used to take us on—I remember that too—on Sunday drives. That was before he got so involved with golf. And the Sunday drive, what it would be would be, we’d go out around—what was the place they called Pinky’s Pantry [phonetic]? And that’s where all the general neighborhood of where Oak Hills is now. And then we’d go out that way and we circle around and go around Mikey’s and then just make this big—so that was same group [unclear]. [laughs] It wasn’t very long. So then I think that’s about all I remember about the old days.

Interviewer: So to get back to Woodbridge, then you stayed in Woodbridge for a number of years.

F. Hansen: Until, I think, let me see, I had both babies [Warren and John Hansen] there. And Johnny was six months old. That was it, Johnny was six months old when we moved back to Metuchen. And we moved to a house right down the street here [at 52 Home Street] when we first moved back to Metuchen not knowing that we could have bought this one [at 14 Home Street]. But we didn't know that; we didn't know it that this home is up for sale. And so the boys went over to Washington School [present-day Mildred B. Moss Elementary School]. And then things were just, I think, about as normal as you can think of. Not much in the way of anything exciting happening then. Perfectly normal. I taught Sunday school and got involved with [Boy] Scouts, that sort of thing; I did a lot of that. I don't do any church work anymore. Well, I think you sort of grow out of that too, and it's only right because it's good for the younger ones to come and do that sort of thing.

Interviewer: I think you just change your direction after a while.

F. Hansen: Oh, I think so. I think so, and I think that's healthy for the church too. It's good for them to have new younger people coming in and doing things all the time. I think that's a good way for it to work. And anyhow, as soon as the boys got into high school, I started thinking about what I was going to do. I had always liked to do anything in the literary way; I was a great bookworm. And I wrote some poems and they were published in *Good Housekeeping*.

Interviewer: Where were those? I never knew that.

F. Hansen: Yeah, *Good Housekeeping* and *Cosmopolitan*. I did that, but then I started doing the puzzles. That was when I stopped teaching Sunday school; I had time Sunday morning. And I thought, *Oh, you know this is*—there was very little market for [unclear], very few. And it got [unclear] steadily now, there's practically none. But there's always a market for crossword puzzles, plenty of them in there. So I had been doing puzzles for no more than a year, I thought, *Well, this is something that maybe I can do*. And I made up my first one and I sent it to *The New York Times* editor, who is Margaret Farrar². [laughs] And I was sure it was just beautiful; I thought it was the best thing in the world. And I got it back in about three days. [laughs] And she said I had broken every rule in the book. And I didn't even know there were rules.

Interviewer: Did you know there were rules?

F. Hansen: I had no idea. What I did know, I did know that the pattern had to be symmetrical. That is to say, if you had a black up the bottom, it had to have a matching black up at the top, really (the pattern).

Interviewer: I see you mark out the squares, is that it?

² Margaret Petherbridge Farrar (1897-1984) was an American journalist and the first crossword puzzle editor for *The New York Times* (1942-1969). She was the creator of many rules of modern crossword design, and she wrote a long-running series of crossword puzzle books including the first-ever book of any kind published by Simon & Schuster.

F. Hansen: It must be symmetrical so that if you turn the puzzle upside down, you'll still have the same pattern. The only black that does not have a buddy, is the one directly in the middle, the one smack in the middle. That's the only one that does not have a mate. And I did know that, so the puzzle had, so it had been symmetrical. But I didn't know this. She said, "Two pages clues." And she said, "Now, I do like the idea. And you can do this using the same idea, but do it obeying the rules. I'd like to have another look at it." So obeying the rules—

Interviewer: Well, now that was good of her. She could have just sent it back and said no.

F. Hansen: Yes, yes. And she told me where to get the proper paper because I hadn't even used the proper graph paper. [laughs] And so I sent for the proper graph paper. And then I started studying the rules, which couldn't make head or tails of because it was percents, so many of the blacks should be so many percent of the whole blah, blah, blah. And so many words, et cetera, et cetera. And so finally got around, so I knew how to count the words and how many blacks I could use and how many [unclear] I could use. And just struggled away because I did not have the books then that I have now, that I had built up over the years. I didn't have them when I started it. Books are a great, great help. Believe me. Oh my! So anyhow, got it together, sent it back to her, and she did publish it. And then started publishing regularly.

Interviewer: That's remarkable that the second one you—

F. Hansen: Actually, it was the same one revised.

Interviewer: Really?

F. Hansen: It was the same one that I had taken out the—yeah, I had even used two-letter words. I had never noticed that puzzles did not have two-letter words; only cheap puzzles had two-letter words in it. *Times* never uses two-letter words. And most of the good puzzles do not use two-letter words or three-letter words, as few of them as possible. So by the time I got the two-letter words out of that thing, of course it was—really it would have been better just to have drawn up a whole new diagram instead of trying to adjust that one. But I didn't have that much sense. And lots of things you don't learn until you work with them.

Interviewer: I just think it's the most remarkable thing that you could do this.

F. Hansen: Oh, I loved it.

Interviewer: Crossword puzzles defeat me totally.

F. Hansen: Well, they're sort of a required habit.

Interviewer: Just can't make any sense of it!

F. Hansen: I think probably what you should do if you would like to do them, is when you sit down with somebody who knows how to solve them and to steer you into how to go about approaching this. The mistake a lot of people make is looking at the first step [unclear] and just sticking there and trying to work that section instead of going on through the puzzle, see what they do know and write in what they do,

what they are absolutely sure of. If you write in those things all around the puzzle, it will give you a little starting area and you can work from there and you can work backwards to that first section. And just don't ever spend a whole lot of time on a section that you don't—that you may find you just work its way in if you go around and put in what you do know. And then of course, there's a lot of other little things that the seasoned puzzle solvers catch on to. They will know if you say a [unclear] and oh—well, somebody who has never done puzzles is not going to know that. So having done puzzles, it would be a better idea for you to sit down with somebody who has done them and tell you these little things that you would eventually catch onto yourself. It would be a time saver.

Well anyhow, when I did that, then I was really hooked myself and had never stopped doing it and still doing it till this day. And Ernie did not like puzzles. He would do the book ones because they had the—I mean solve the answers in the back of the book. And he could see the newspaper ones, at least with *The Times*, the Sunday ones, you have to wait till the next week to get the answers. And so there was nothing for him to turn to if he couldn't get the books now. He could turn to the back of the book and get himself out of a naughty situation. And so he didn't mind doing those too much, but he never really cared about—he was not interested in anything of that nature. Some people are drawn to words (printed words), and some people are not.

Interviewer: Well that's the thing that puzzles me. I'm very interested in words; I have always been. I read a great deal in all kinds of things, particularly classics and things like that. But when it comes to puzzles— [chuckles]

F. Hansen: As I said, that's just a matter of practice, is mostly what it is because it certainly doesn't take any particular skill to do it. It's practice mostly.

Interviewer: But it must take a great deal of creative thinking, like [unclear] to originate.

F. Hansen: Well, where that comes in is, that's where the creativeness comes in, is in the theme for a puzzle. When puzzles have no theme, they do not take a particular creativeness. But you can take a craftsmanship, but not particularly a creativeness unless they have a theme and then you have got to think of a theme. And anything you think up is creative. So I have always enjoyed putting words into puzzles. I would make up the verse and then work that one into a puzzle so I combine my own love for [unclear] and the puzzles.

Interviewer: Well, I love the things that were in the papers, the article that you had about you. The one in the beginning, I don't remember them, but they just were wonderful. [laughter] I read them over the phone to Cam, yes, "Wait till you hear these."

F. Hansen: Ida, do you think you have enough now? I don't want sound like I'm just droning on and on.

Interviewer: No, no, no. I'm fine.

F. Hansen: We really have brought me up to date now.

Interviewer: No, I brought you up to date and that is fine. And I just thought if you would like to just expand a little bit on your puzzle career: some of the people you met, maybe some

of things that happened. Because I have—I'm just looking [at the tape recorder] because I don't want to come to the end and have it stop and we're talking and we're not taping. [laughter] You know I have about five minutes and then I would flip it over to the other side. But this is such an interesting kind of work that you do with puzzles that I thought you must have some wonderful stories.

F. Hansen: **I have made many friends. And of course, I'm great friends with, after Margaret retired as editor of *The Times*, Will Weng³ came on. And he is just a doll. He is a dear and a very, very sweet editor too.**

Interviewer: Would you give me again Margaret's last name, was what?

F. Hansen: **F-a-r-r-a-r, Farrar. Her husband was the Farrar in Farrar Straus Publishing⁴.**

Interviewer: Oh, yes.

F. Hansen: **Yeah. And they were [unclear] Straus. And she [Margaret Farrar] was a doll; she was a little woman and just as bright as they come. And she took a liking to me and to Ernie too. And she would have us come in to lunch and that's—in fact, I went in yesterday. Those luncheons are still going on although with an entirely different—of course, Margaret's died years ago. Well, Will is still—he gets the crowd together as a matter of fact. And we have this puzzle luncheon⁵ once a month. I mean he is in New York, so he arranges.**

Interviewer: Who does this? Who is it?

F. Hansen: **Will. Will Weng.**

Interviewer: Will Weng, okay.

F. Hansen: **He was the editor that followed Margaret. And when Margaret was alive [unclear], she would have us and Will would meet us and then Harriet from *The Times*, and we would meet in New York and have lunch decades ago. As it worked out, as it is today, it's once a month, no longer with Margaret, with a different crowd of constructors.**

Interviewer: Do you have it in a particular place?

F. Hansen: **Yes. Well, we've moved up and down West 46th Street. The one restaurant that we used to go to, that folded. And so now we are at one of the restaurants called Le Rivage, and we've been there for about, I guess, two years. It's sort of a central location for everybody to get to. And for me it's easy, I take the train in.**

³ Will Weng (1907-1993) was an American journalist and crossword puzzle editor for *The New York Times* from 1969 to 1977, succeeding Margaret Farrar. He later became the editor for a start-up crossword puzzle venture called the Crossword Club and prepared roughly five Sunday-sized crosswords every month for distribution to subscribers.

⁴ Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG) is an American book publishing company founded in 1946 by Roger Williams Straus Jr. and John C. Farrar.

⁵ The puzzle luncheon was a group of cruciverbalists, which included four crossword puzzle editors from *The New York Times*, that met in Manhattan once a month. Ms. Hansen became the leader and organizer of this luncheon, which continued to her death in 2004.

And I'm used to going in because now that Warren [her son] is in New York, I go in for a lot operas. I couldn't miss—I did miss the new opera this year.

Interviewer: The Ghosts of Versailles [opera]?

F. Hansen: Yes. That's about the only one I did miss. We had tickets for that, but I had a cold or a touch of flu or whatever and just couldn't do it. But I do go in very frequently; he loves the opera and so do I. And when Margaret was editor, I didn't do many puzzles. I did puzzles for *The Times* and I did puzzles for *The Times* books and, I guess, for Simon & Shuster because Margaret also was editor for Simon & Shuster puzzle books. But those were about all I did. And then when she retired, Will Weng took over and his Crossword Club was very successful. And I do puzzles for his Crossword Club now. And I also do a great many of them for the West Coast [*Los Angeles Times*] syndicate, which is run by Jim Boldt [James Boldt], who is now in Atlanta. I do those puzzles under three different names, two of them are my grandmother's names.

Interviewer: I read that in that article, yeah.

F. Hansen: Yeah, I'm Frances Hansen, of course. But then I'm also Letitia Luxton and I'm Fannie Bencraft. [laughter] And that's because, although most solvers never even notice the name up at the top, if they are smart, they'll look at the title and that's—by the way, if you are doing *Times* puzzles, look at the title because that very often has a clue. There's a clue in the title. Now the West Coast unfortunately doesn't use titles, but they do give you your byline.

Are we running near the end?

Interviewer: Well, it's near the end. What I think I'm going to do, I'm going to turn it over. [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

F. Hansen: I have one of those.

Interviewer: Side Two, Frances Hansen.

F. Hansen: Okay, let's go. [muffled question]

Interviewer: Well, these are very easy. The one I am getting is a little Walkman-size, you know about this big [gesturing], and it has a microphone that you just clip on here.

F. Hansen: Oh! The way they do on the TV.

Interviewer: Yeah. And then a remote thing that you can control from this. So it will be easier than having to watch.

F. Hansen: Nice! What fun! Imagine that. What a good idea! Well, mine are just Katie and Emmie [phonetic], my grandchildren, they sent me a cassette from their piano recitals.

Interviewer: Oh, that's nice. It's a lot more fun listening to somebody than reading.

F. Hansen: Oh, yes, yes. Well, it's one way to keep in touch with them.

But anyhow, when Will came on, and I started branching out around then, I think it was, then I went to other publications. And then of course after, once Ernie died, I had a lot more time and I found it was a great—when you're doing puzzles, you're concentrating on that, so it takes your mind off your grief. It's a great, great, great escape actually. So I do quite a lot of them. I do them usually, I do them in the morning and then I take my walk in the—take my break and my walk in the afternoon; I go very often [unclear] in the afternoon. Then when I'm looking at TV at night, I will have my work on my lap. And so if what's on TV is very interesting, then I will pay attention to that. But if my work on my lap gets more interesting, then I'll pay attention to that. And I get quite a lot done just amusing myself like that.

Interviewer: Well, I get so frustrated with TV anymore because the frequency of the commercials just disturb the storyline and because I watch *Northern Exposure* [television series], which I love.

F. Hansen: Oh, I haven't tried that!

Interviewer: Oh, it's wonderful. I really enjoy it so much, but there's a commercial every four or five minutes! [chuckles]

F. Hansen: The trouble is, with successful programs, you get more commercials. That's the catch.

Interviewer: They draw more customers.

F. Hansen: And *Thirteen* [Public Broadcasting Service], of course, has wonderful programs. But they also have these interminable sales, which go on and on and on. [laughs] I think they are having trouble now.

Interviewer: Well, I think I lot them are. You know because money is tight.

F. Hansen: Money is tight, and they—particularly, I think, with anything that depends on charitable contributions. They're having a very hard time with it. Well, people do decry TV, but I have always been very grateful to it because when my mother was bedridden, I don't know what she would have done without TV to distract her.

Interviewer: Oh, they have a place with a bunch of TVs?

F. Hansen: Yes, can you imagine just lying in bed? And she could no longer—she could read some, but not to amuse herself all day. And she would watch the baseball games, and she understood baseball so that she didn't even—she would sometimes just turn off the announcer and keep her own score. It wouldn't bother her. [laughter] It would irritate her some. She would turn him off and keep her own score. And I think if just to keep invalids happy, TV has certainly succeeded.

Interviewer: Well, I'm sure it's a big plus in a hospital.

F. Hansen: Oh, of course. Yes.

Interviewer: [muffled comment] I've seen the name Eugene Maleska⁶ on the puzzles.

F. Hansen: Gene took over when Will retired; then Gene took over. Gene immediately—his way of doing things is not like Will's. Well, they're all different. Will's wasn't like Margaret's. When Gene first came on, his puzzles were inclined to be too pedantic because he was a former schoolteacher and he simply couldn't overcome his desire to teach everybody. Well, people usually do puzzles for entertainment. We don't want to be taught. [laughs] At least not at the cost of being entertained. If you can sneak in a little instruction without it being painful, fine, but his was quite painful at first because we're getting lessons instead of being entertained. But he did weather enough criticisms and he realized himself, he couldn't go on like that. So then he loosened up and so-so and his puzzles became more entertaining, and now there just about as they should be.

Many people think that *The Times* Sunday crossword is the hardest; it is not the hardest. It is considerably easier than a lot them that you would find in crossword puzzle magazines because the crossword puzzle magazines are sold to people who are crossword addicts. And they're able to do more difficult—*The Sunday Times Magazine* goes to a wide public who probably only do the Sunday puzzle and that is their once-a-week puzzle. And they're used to taking it. They like a whole week to do it; the answers appear the following week. So it is not aimed at a very-hardened puzzle group of solvers, and where you will find a very tough puzzle is *The Times* Saturday puzzle, and even the Friday one. You see they start on the Monday with an easy puzzle, I think, under the theory that people are going back to work on Monday and they got a lot of things on their mind. They don't want to spend a whole lot of time on the puzzle. So Monday is very easy. Tuesdays are still easy but a little bit harder. And then progressively through the week, it gets tougher and tougher until Saturday when you get the book thrown at you. Saturdays are usually beasts and that is because they assume you will be home on Saturday and can look up things because people do not have the sources to look up all the things, but some of them do. And then on Sunday, that is for broad public, not an average group of solvers.

Interviewer: How do you decide how difficult to make your puzzles?

F. Hansen: You do that by the definitions. If you can make a puzzle hard to solve or easy to solve by your use of definitions.

Interviewer: But if you are going to submit a puzzle to, not *The Times*, but some other syndicate, do you have to decide? Or do they say to you, "Well, we want a very hard one. We want one that isn't very hard"?

F. Hansen: Sometimes they will request one like that. But generally speaking, they don't. They ask you for a puzzle. And if they specify, we want it harder, then you make

⁶ Eugene Thomas Maleska (1916-1993) was a United States crossword puzzle constructor and editor. *The New York Times* published dozens of crosswords that he had submitted as a freelance contributor, and he became the crossword editor in 1977, replacing Will Weng. In 1993, he was succeeded by Will Shortz

it hard. When I do a lot of puzzles for *Dell Magazines* and I do them for the particular—*Dell* puts out a lot of puzzle magazines—I do them for the particular magazine called *Dell Champion*. And the *Dell Champion*, they will give you stars. They rate a puzzle according to its difficulty by stars. A one-star would be a very easy puzzle to solve, and then so on up to the—there's one five-star and there's a few four-stars, which are all tough. And they will grade the puzzles themselves according to the—some puzzles are more difficult. I think my verse puzzles are difficult because you can't anticipate what the next words will be. Frequently you can anticipate in a puzzle when you're solving because—well, say the solver has used the phrase “Gone With The Wind.” Well if it says a [Margaret] Mitchell book in the definition, and you have “Gone,” you are going to write in “Gone With The Wind” and anticipate the whole thing. And that's very easy if it's my verse, you can't tell what I am going to say next, you see, because they will—usually it's just starter verse for the first line and more verse for the second lines, and no way of graphing. So you make your verse definitions; you make them very easy because they've got to get every letter. Theoretically, you should be able to get every letter. If you have introduced into a puzzle a difficult word or a word that you think they might have to look up, then you surround it with words—you try to with words that are very easy and can be easily defined so that they can get—so the purpose—the constructor (they call people who make up crossword puzzles, constructors)—the constructor's purpose is not to stump the solver. His purpose is to see that the solver gets the puzzle or he has failed.

Interviewer: I see. Yeah, otherwise he will throw his hands up and not do it.

F. Hansen: Otherwise, he should not do it. And of course, this is assuming that you have got a solver who is used to solving puzzles. So that is why you will see frequently the same phrases turn up over and over; just mentioned [unclear] another one—oh, what would be—I can't think of any right off the bat, but I'm sure there is a million of them. [coughs] That is why you see them, is because he wants you to get that one. The solver wants to get that one because, to help you, to enable you to get a word that's crossing it, that you wouldn't be expected to know. So there's many other things you can learn about constructing, which you don't learn for years and years, that you forgot later on, that you “this is going to work,” and that this—the hardest part of puzzle constructing is finding a new theme. To do a puzzle without a theme is to me utterly dull. I just assume be reading words in a dictionary. To have a theme though is to be—to read one into the puzzle is much more not only satisfactory as far as the solver is concerned, who's even tried to entertain, we try to amuse. If you don't amuse, you try to at least interest the solver. And that is where the toughest part, staging, “What on Earth am I going to do a puzzle on this time?” because too many have been taken. They've all been done, that was practically nothing new left under the sun in the way of putting things into puzzles. They had run their course now for a long time. I would put it in objects that you can draw in a puzzle; they call those rebus puzzles. And say it was a [unclear], an arrow, you had to draw the arrow, like I shot an arrow into the air and you would be able to get all the words, but when you came to arrow, you had to draw an arrow in, and make that arrow into other words such as narrow and well within that [unclear]. And I also did—oh, I did eggs too. You had to get eggs. I think I've drawn about everything there is known: pots, pans, rats, dogs, cats, stars, and moons, suns, anything that can be woven into the words. And that was quite popular, they still do some, but it's pretty much run its

course, people yawn a little when they think, *Oh, it's going to be ones of these "I draw things in."*

Interviewer: Can you use fourth-rule expressions?

F. Hansen: Oh yes. They're welcome.

Interviewer: Or current—

F. Hansen: Yes. They brighten it up, um-hm.

Interviewer: Because I read Safire's column⁷ in the *Sunday Magazine* and he comes up with lots of interesting words.

F. Hansen: He does. Yes, he does. Yes indeed, you can. What you have to be careful of is that they are all not known. A lot of the newer ones are not in the dictionary yet and you might confuse if you are in a part of the country that uses it a lot. You have to remember that people are going to be doing this in another part of the country where possibly that phrase has not become popular yet. Well, that's your only—otherwise certainly then you use—in fact, the more informal the puzzle is, the more you get away from any idea, formality, or stiffness, or the better it is. And it is more interesting to solve it; it doesn't sound so much like a textbook.

Interviewer: It's interesting to me that you say you've been meeting for lunch over a long period of time and you know that immediately brought to my mind was the Round Table at the Algonquin⁸.

F. Hansen: [laughs] Yes, yeah. And they were a clever bunch.

Interviewer: They sure were.

F. Hansen: I loved Dorothy Parker [critic, poet, and short-story writer] and [Robert] Benchley [humorist and actor] and, oh my goodness.

Interviewer: And George Kaufman [playwright and director].

F. Hansen: Especially Kaufman. And I remember they said that Tallulah Bankhead [actress] had tried to break into that—she finally made it, I think, but she had to try and try because they didn't want any part of it. But she finally made it into that group. Yes, they were marvelous wits, all of them. Well, you don't hear that at our luncheons because—you hear shop talk sometimes, but then a lot of just, "So then I took the baby here," [laughs] and just—

Interviewer: People talk, huh?

⁷ William Lewis Safir (1929-2009) was an American author, columnist, journalist, and presidential speechwriter. He was a long-time syndicated political columnist for *The New York Times* and wrote the "On Language" column in *The New York Times Magazine* about popular etymology, new or unusual usages, and other language-related topics.

⁸ The Algonquin Round Table was a group of New York City writers, critics, actors, and wits. Gathering initially as part of a practical joke, members of "The Vicious Circle," as they dubbed themselves, met for lunch each day at the Algonquin Hotel from 1919 until roughly 1929. At these luncheons, they engaged in wisecracks, wordplay, and witticisms that were disseminated across the country through the newspaper columns by Round Table members.

F. Hansen: People talk, a lot of people. No, real people talk, that's right. Not anything—sometimes there's Mel [unclear] who does the puns and anagrams and has been doing them for years, and he is so funny. He is so witty. I don't know of anybody that can come up with such quick things. And he was—you know one of his freaks was just wasn't happy, so it was funny, real funny. But mostly it's just a bit of shop talk and then, "What have you been doing lately?" [laughs] They're nice though, very nice. As they say, there's a lot of new puzzle publications; there are new puzzle people on the scene. For a while, there was a lot of unrest. They called it the "new wave" coming on, which are younger, young people who—really what they wanted to do was enlarge the scope of what they could use in the puzzles and bring in commercial names, brand names, et cetera. Well, that is still frowned upon for one reason, it isn't quite fair to the competitors if you move one name. When they do, when they have done it, what they try to do is say, "Competitor of so-and-so." But *The Times* does not really. They might once in a while use brand name or a trademark, but not [unclear]. Most of the words are taken from just—well, there's *Webster's, Second Edition* was a marvelous dictionary, but it is too old-fashioned. It has no space terms at all, and of course, computer terms has none of—

Interviewer: Yes, the idea of computer terms.

F. Hansen: Have a whole new language right there.

Interviewer: Open a whole new—yes, a whole new world.

F. Hansen: Hence so in space, so in space. Well, *Webster's, III* was rather disappointing; it had no proper names in it. You had to use another thing to go to for town cities and people. *Random House, First Edition* was fine, and now they have the *Random House, Second Edition*, which is the one that I use, the *Random House, Second Edition*, because it has got people and places and can save you a bit more time. The ordinary little one that I worked with on the sofa, that is the *Webster's, Third College Edition* and that's been an abridged edition, which is of course not as—doesn't have the many words of the other dictionaries there. I also use every other kind of an encyclopedia and reference book you can think of. I have the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and I have the *Encyclopedia Americana* and I have books on—literary books, *Reader's Digest*, *Reader's Companion*, and that will give you a lot of listing of authors and books. Then I have books of famous people and books on comics, song books, movie books, and of course, the almanacs, and books on every subject (some musical comedy), books on every subject in the world because those words come into the puzzles. It's very, very thing because you don't know what word you are going to come up with and it is a good idea to look up the words, make sure you got the meaning. You don't have to know in depth anything particularly, but you have to add a [unclear], just enough so you can give a definition.

Interviewer: So that added up to quite an investment in books for you.

F. Hansen: Well, they're acquired gradually. And a lot have been given to me. For Christmas every year, Will will give me something useful, and on my birthdays too. And then when I would see a book myself, I think, *Oh, I can use that*. Most of them are acquired over the years painlessly.

Interviewer: Well, that must give you a great sense of satisfaction to anyone who loves books and words. I mean it's like a treasure right at your fingertips all the time.

F. Hansen: Yes! Oh yes. Always, always. I always did love to read and just could not imagine life without books. This way when I go up to bed, I always have to read for about an hour no matter what time I go up to bed.

Interviewer: I do too. Do you know what I am reading right now?

F. Hansen: What's that?

Interviewer: For Christmas, I got a book of poems by Matthew Arnold [English poet].

F. Hansen: Oh!

Interviewer: And it was very interesting that my daughter Catherine [phonetic] gave it to me. I recall and let me pause here because we don't need—I think we just close it. [laughter] I just want to—

F. Hansen: Would you like a grilled cheese sandwich?

Interviewer: Well, I better go [unclear].

F. Hansen: Oh, it will take a second! Have to eat anyway. And how about your iced tea?

Interviewer: That will be fine. I just want to get this on that I thank you for letting me come—

F. Hansen: Oh for goodness sakes, no problem! Don't you have to take that out? [recording ends]

[END OF INTERVIEW]