

Interviewee: Miss Grace Halsey
Interviewer: Ruth Terwilliger
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Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

R. Terwilliger: Today is June 28, 1976 and I, Ruth Terwilliger, will be interviewing Miss Grace Halsey of 64 Home Street, Metuchen.

Okay, we are in business now. I want to say Miss Halsey that I really am thrilled today to have this opportunity to come into your lovely home and to interview you and hear a little bit about what you remember Metuchen was like as a young girl. So I will certainly turn it over to you now and let you talk and I'll ask questions as they pop into my head, if you don't mind.

Miss Halsey: All right, fine. I was born in this house, which was the property of my great grandfather on my mother's side. He owned the entire corner from Home Street to Valley Street, which was nothing more than a cart track through to an apple orchard at the Amboy Avenue end of the lane.

The house was originally a basement structure with a dumb waiter coming up into the corner of the dining room from the basement kitchen. And later a large living room with two bedrooms above was added on the south side of the house and a kitchen back to the present dining room. A well in the back yard furnished water. It was never known to fail, even in the driest weather, being fed by an underground stream, which I have been told was a feeder to the Raritan River. My grandfather, Mother's father, was a fruit and produce merchant in Jersey City but when he died at the age of 45, my grandmother and three girls moved out with her parents.

R. Terwilliger: Miss Halsey, I wanted to ask you at this point; when you mentioned about your grandfather being a fruit and produce merchant - did he raise that fruit and produce on this property?

Miss Halsey: Oh no. No, he bought. He was a wholesale man. I can remember Mother telling about his going up to Keene, New Hampshire to buy apples and he used to go south to buy fruit and he would sell it from Jersey City to the retail merchants.

R. Terwilliger: Did you ever travel with him at all, did you ever go into the city?

Miss Halsey: Well, no because he died long before I was

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's right he was only 45, he was a comparatively young man.

Miss Halsey: Yes, he died of pneumonia.

R. Terwilliger: Okay you can continue.

Miss Halsey: My mother was the only one of the girls to marry early, one aunt never married and the other one married late in life. My father died when I was six months old so Mother came home to live. I went to private school until entering public school in the fifth grade. One of the schools was run by Miss Irene Mason, daughter of The Reverend J. G. Mason who was pastor of the Presbyterian Church for about fifty years. The School was held in the manse. Miss Mason later married The Reverend A. E. Harper and they went out to India as missionaries where they both became noted for their work in both religious and sanctity education and received many honors from both the Indian and English governments. India was at that time still under English dominion. The main building of Franklin School had been built by the time I started public school. We used to walk down New Street and cut across the field where the A&P now stands. As we approached Middlesex Avenue, if it was almost 9 o'clock or 1 o'clock in time for the last bell to ring, we would see the principal Mr. T. G. Van Kirk standing in the window of his office at the front of the building waving us on.

R. Terwilliger: Hurry, hurry.

Miss Halsey: On New Street stood two very dilapidated old frame buildings, which were the remains of the old school, which had been split and moved over from Middlesex Avenue. This was the local slum.

R. Terwilliger: These houses – or those two building were eventually just torn down.

Miss Halsey: They were a mess.

R. Terwilliger: I have seen some pictures of the early school and it wasn't even an attractive building then as I recall. The pictures of it I saw it was in good condition as far as structure goes but it was sort of an ugly tall looking thing.

Miss Halsey: It had a couple of towers on it as I remember.

R. Terwilliger: And a long set of steps coming down the front.

Miss Halsey: I don't really remember when it was over on Middlesex Avenue; it stood where Franklin School stands now.

R. Terwilliger: Was it strictly a grade school?

Miss Halsey: Oh no, it was the only school in town.

R. Terwilliger: That was. Okay you can continue again.

Miss Halsey: As a small child, about 9 or 10 I suppose, on Sunday afternoons my mother and I used to walk over to Woodwild Park, a small hill area about where Mr. Hannisford's house now stands. Just beyond his house, two stone pillars still stand with a metal plate and a name, Woodwild Park. A path went up to the hill between these pillars and at the top, seats were made of boards stretched between trees. There we would sit and watch the infrequent cars go by. On Saturday my mother would have bought a 5 cent bag of peanuts and when a car went by going toward New York, I could have a peanut. And when one went by going toward New Brunswick, she could have one. Needless to say a small bag of peanuts would be more than enough for a couple of hours.

I was a retiring child and hated parties until the refreshments were served. The one exception to this dislike was a party given each summer by Mrs. Howard Bloomfield for her daughter, Eleanor. The Bloomfield estate was a beautiful white-pillared house set in extensive grounds. The house has since been torn down but it stood on the right going toward Perth Amboy just beyond the road that goes up over the hill to Woodbridge. And you said that was....?

R. Terwilliger: That's Grandview Avenue today. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the party itself if you can think or recall at all. Now how old did you say you were about when you went to this type of party?

Miss Halsey: I suppose around 12.

R. Terwilliger: And were these coed parties then, boys and girls or were they just girls gathered?

Miss Halsey: I remember there were boys as well as girls.

R. Terwilliger: And were there planned games – did you play games?

Miss Halsey: That part I don't remember anything about what happened after we got there. All I remember is the ride down and the ride back and one ride stands out in particular because Helen Corbin and I were sitting at the back with our feet hanging out over the back of the hay wagon and she lost one of her slippers which created a great furor. We had to stop and the hired man had to get out and get her slipper and bring it back for her.

R. Terwilliger: And did you dress up in special clothes?

Miss Halsey:

Oh sure.

R. Terwilliger:

Sunday best kind of thing and party dresses. But you don't remember whether you played games that would cause or encourage some mixing of the group at all? You draw a blank on what happened? But this was kind of a little bit of a social event.

Miss Halsey:

Well I think the reason I liked it was for the hayride part of it and of course the refreshments. I don't remember much about those either but I'm sure there must have been refreshments.

One of the hired men would drive the hay wagon up to the Lundy house on Amboy Avenue, fourth from the corner on the south side. Mrs. Lundy was Mrs. Bloomfield's mother and the children would gather there and be driven on the hay wagon to the Bloomfield home for the party and then driven back to Metuchen. Memorial Day or as it was then called Decoration Day, is another memory. The local children would gather at the Presbyterian Church each bringing as many flowers as they could come by. We would then go over to the Colonial Cemetery and then to the Presbyterian Cemetery, leaving flowers on the graves of the Civil War soldiers, which had been marked with small flags. I always tried to hang on to my flowers until we got to my grandfather's grave. He had joined the Union Army against his father's wishes and had been disinherited. But when word came home that he had been killed, all was forgiven and my great grandfather went down with a coffin to bring the body home, only to find that like Mark Twain, the report of his death had been greatly exaggerated. And he lived for twenty-five or so more years.

R. Terwilliger:

Isn't that something? Did I note a little bit of amusement in your report on that when you said that once he was reported killed all was forgiven? I would be curious to know what your grandfather, or was it a grandfather?

Miss Halsey:

My great grandfather.

R. Terwilliger:

Great grandfather - what his reaction was when he found out he was alive.

Miss Halsey:

That I don't know. As I say, we were a family that never talked things over. And there are an awful lot of things that I wish now that I had asked about but...as I say, I just didn't. One of the local scandals which I remember being discussed was when a minister by the name of Ezra Mundy, if I remember rightly, came back to town for the purpose of having his wife's body exhumed in order to reclaim a diamond ring which she had had on when buried. The populace, especially the Presbyterian contingent, were

horrified. A later talk of the town was when a local man was reported to have been with a companion – not his wife – near the site on the night of Halls Mills murder.

R. Terwilliger: Now on this point I thought about, did this gentleman have anything to do with the murder?

Miss Halsey: No, he was just in a tryst out there.

R. Terwilliger: I see, and in the research or in the reporting of this, this event came out?

Miss Halsey: I suppose it must have. I didn't know about it until I read that book which is in the Library – maybe not now but there was a book on the Halls Mills case and it mentions this Mr. Soper and he lived right over here next to Ethel Mayo's, the next house in. I didn't want to put his name in but I guess everybody's forgotten him.

R. Terwilliger: And it is in the book. I read the book also. But I wondered if as a local person if you had read it someplace or it really was something that was brought out when they did the investigation.

Miss Halsey: I didn't realize it until it was in the book.

Two of the notables in town were Mr. & Mrs. Volkmar who lived in the big house on the corner of Middlesex and – it is New Durham Road isn't it? It's opposite that Flexi –

R. Terwilliger: Yes, that's New Durham Road, right.

Miss Halsey: They had a small studio behind the house where they made beautiful pottery. My mother had become a portrait photographer and she took interesting pictures of Mrs. Volkmar and one of the workmen named Mike at their pottery wheels. There was a son Leon, an arty looking young man complete with beard and beret, and he was the first man I ever saw wearing a wristwatch.

R. Terwilliger: Well that I found interesting, is that really true? Up until that time it was always a pocket watch?

Miss Halsey: Yes.

R. Terwilliger: So he was kind of

Miss Halsey: Very arty, yes.

R. Terwilliger: Just from the way you describe him as what the kids today would call "hippy".

Miss Halsey: Yes, yes, and of course he was I suppose one of the first men, except very elderly men, that I ever saw ever wearing a beard – the first young man wearing a beard.

R. Terwilliger: Yes, and a beret!

Miss Halsey: And a beret.

R. Terwilliger: Right. Did he take up – was he part of his father's business?

Miss Halsey: I don't know. As I say here he didn't seem to be interested in the family business but I think he did go into some sort of art work in New York. And Dolly Buchanan might know because she was very interested in the family and has, I think, a good many of the nice Volkmar pieces.

R. Terwilliger: You're absolutely right.

Miss Halsey: I have some too but mother couldn't afford to buy the perfect pieces so mine are all seconds; that big jug up there for instance, up here above my head, and I have the tiles in the drawing room and several other vases but they are all definitely seconds.

R. Terwilliger: We had a whole display case last year down at the library of Mrs. Buchanan's collection and she does have a beautiful collection.

Miss Halsey: I have I think these two pictures still that Mother took if the Historical Society would be interesting in having those at all I would be glad to give them.

R. Terwilliger: Of what, of Mrs. Volkmar?

Brief pause in taping

Miss Halsey: Another notable whom I remember was Mr. Lindenthal. And he lived out in one of the houses out near Pumptown – you know where Pumptown Corner is? –

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes, right.

Miss Halsey: And he designed and I supposed oversaw the building of Hell Gate Bridge. He was a famous bridge designer and he was a big burly German, he had a great beard and what I particularly remember about him was his shoes – the soles of his shoes were always about an inch thick. Of course he used to come into Metuchen to take the train into the city. So he was another one of the notable people who lived here.

R. Terwilliger: Now, what time period are we talking about here, do you think?

Miss Halsey: Well I suppose around the time of the - I don't remember when he died but I suppose I must have been – probably around the time of the First World War, maybe 1910-12, maybe even later.

R. Terwilliger: Just a general idea, I don't remember how old that bridge is. So he lived here as a married man?

Miss Halsey: He had a beautiful wife and they had one daughter.

R. Terwilliger: Does that house still stand out there? Is that the very large one to the right as you approach Pumptown Corner?

Miss Halsey: I don't know. I can't remember it was there or whether there was another house further on that has been since torn down.

R. Terwilliger: Because there is a very impressive home on the right hand side that kind of has a circular driveway and looks to be a vintage home.

Miss Halsey: There were several very large houses along that road and as I say I don't really remember.

R. Terwilliger: Why did they call it Pumptown Corner? Do you know?

Miss Halsey: There used to be a pump there, there was a little sort of an island right in the middle of the road there as I remember and there was a pump there.

R. Terwilliger: Didn't the Hejl's live out that way too? Didn't they have a large home?

Miss Halsey: They lived out at Woodland Farms.

R. Terwilliger: Well then who am I thinking of – just before you approach – did they live in a very large house on the left-hand side.

Miss Halsey: Oh you mean the Williams.

R. Terwilliger: The Williams, that's right, yes.

Miss Halsey: Mr. Williams, he was connected with Woolworth's and that was a very lovely place. And his daughter is Mrs. Dana who stills lives somewhere here in town.

R. Terwilliger: That's the name I'm thinking of too, the Danas. I knew it was the Hejl's or the Dana's that were connected with that area. We used to go to the Hejl's. I can't remember what for now. I don't remember if it was a scout troop to visit their farm or.....?

Miss Halsey: And then of course across the street from the Williams is the old house that is still standing, Drayton Mook bought it eventually. I don't who lives there.

R. Terwilliger: There is still a sign that says Mook on it.

Miss Halsey: Well, perhaps he's still living there then.

R. Terwilliger: But that's another very lovely, lovely home.

Miss Halsey: It is very attractive, I've never been in it but it's beautiful from the outside.

R. Terwilliger: Yes.

Miss Halsey: My old recollections of Main Street include a trolley which ran up and down from Christol Street to Amboy Avenue to connect with the Perth Amboy and New Brunswick line. It ran on a rather irregular schedule with a jolly Irishman doubling as motorman and conductor. He was also inclined to tipple and was drunk occasionally.

R. Terwilliger: Now I wanted to ask you something about the trolleys. I don't know who it was that I was interviewing that told me in the wintertime they actually had a stove on the trolley, that there was a fire kept going to keep you warm.

Miss Halsey: Well, yes that was the only way I guess. I didn't ride the trolleys much because I got carsick and once in a great while in the summertime we would ride down to, well it's where Camp Kilmer, where Camp Raritan is now. Friends of my mother's had a farm there and they raised mostly tomatoes. I can remember being taken down there in the summer and going out in the fields with the other kids and picking tomatoes off the vine and eating them. I've never eaten tomatoes that tasted like than since. But my one aunt worked in the bank in Perth Amboy and she used to go back and forth on the trolleys and that was the only means for heating in the wintertime.

R. Terwilliger: I really – it was just unbelievable to me that they would actually have – I believe it was Mr. Fenton that told me – a small pot-bellied stove and it was heated by wood or coal depending on what they had. And he said a great trick for some of the young boys was to spit on the stove and listen to it hiss. I'm sure the girls didn't go in to this sort of thing. But he said it was quite a trick and some of the older men used to amuse the children by doing this. I wanted to ask you also, that run into Perth Amboy did you ever go to the beaches along the river over in Perth Amboy?

Miss Halsey: Once in a great while, when I was in high school we used to go down there occasionally to the shore right at Perth Amboy. But the sand was not very nice white sand and also it soon began to get polluted so it really wasn't where you could bathe over there. I can remember once going over to Staten Island.

R. Terwilliger: On the ferry?

Miss Halsey: And going to a beach over there but I never learned to swim so I wasn't particularly interested in that. There was a place they called Boynton Beach and we used to go there on Sunday school picnics and I think that was further down beyond Perth Amboy – I don't know what the town would be now but it's where all those gas – big gas tanks are.

R. Terwilliger: Oh that is the Hess –

Miss Halsey: Sewaren.

R. Terwilliger: Sewaren, yes. The river probably there was very lovely there at that time. I think Mr. Fenton also mentioned when I interviewed him from his church that that was one of the annual kind of summertime things that the church did was to go to Sewaren.

Miss Halsey: Later when we got a little more prosperous, we used to go to Asbury Park and hire a trolley for the trip down and back and then take the train from Perth Amboy. I don't know whether we had a special train or not. I doubt it because I don't think enough people went. But we would go down from the day.

R. Terwilliger: Just for the day – you never stayed overnight?

Miss Halsey: Well not on the picnics. As a child we occasionally had a cottage in Ocean Grove for the summer, or for a month or so. Did I say it was known as the Toonerville Trolley?

R. Terwilliger: No and I thought that was just a very, very darling name. It sounds like a children's story or something.

Miss Halsey: Well, I think the Toonerville Trolley was a comic strip.

R. Terwilliger: I think you're right. When I read it I thought, "Where have I heard it before?" Perhaps that's where.

Miss Halsey: The stores that I remember on Main Street were Hanneman's Bakery, which was I think where Drake's Hardware Store is now, and then came Robins' Hall, which has Donald Hume's Hardware. This was the center for theatrical performances, minstrel shows and other social affairs on the second floor. The downstairs was occupied by Mr. LaForge's Grocery Store

if I remember rightly. Then came a candy and stationery store run by Mr. & Mrs. Perry who lived upstairs over the shop. Mr. Perry also had a small press in the back of the store and did job printing. Then came a hardware store and then McGuinness' saloon and in the next block was Kramer's Department Store and another saloon run by a Mr. Lawless.

R. Terwilliger: Was that actually his name – Lawless?

Miss Halsey: Yes. A plumber's shop and the Methodist Church – now there must have been other stores along there but I don't remember what they were. And crossing over, Danford's was on the corner and then came Mr. Ford's Hardware Store and while he was tax collector, one also paid one's taxes there. On the corner of Highland Avenue, Mr. Rumler, a plumber, built our first movie house and his daughter Helen used to bring his piano music for the silent pictures. The Metuchen Inn sat on a rise in the middle of that lot. It had been built by Mr. Robins but when he built another house on Middlesex Avenue opposite Linden, the home was turned into a hotel. Now whether it was Mr. Robins' father who built the old house and the house on Middlesex Avenue was built for the son, I don't remember. I remember Nate Robins, of course he was a cousin of mine. He must have been my father's uncle. Nate Robins' sister was my Grandfather Halsey's first wife. Anyway we are related somehow. As I say, I don't remember whether it was he or his father that built this big house but they had loads of money. I don't know how they made their money. So when the old folks died off and Uncle Nate built his house on Middlesex Avenue he turned this into a hotel on Main Street.

R. Terwilliger: Now is that the Metuchen Inn that we know today that is on Middlesex Avenue?

Miss Halsey: No, that's an entirely different place. That was made over out of a house I guess.

R. Terwilliger: Where was this second home on Middlesex.

Miss Halsey: It's where - the big house where they have three or four apartments; where the Poandl's live.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that was it, I see.

Miss Halsey: Mrs. Robins still lives on the third floor.

R. Terwilliger: Right, someone did tell me that recently. That I should get to her to do a tape.

Miss Halsey: I think probably. She's very retiring as I understand it and I hardly know her even though she is a second or third cousin. Our family never was strong on... First of all, Mrs. Poandl said to me one day, why don't you come over and see – I can't remember which one is still living -

R. Terwilliger: Elsie, isn't it Elsie

Miss Halsey: There was an Elsie.

R. Terwilliger: I think that's what somebody told me.

Miss Halsey: There was a Dorothy but she married. And Elsie and - what was the sister's name - they lived there together and one of them died leaving this remaining one. As I understand it, Sterling Mayo bought that house originally and turned it into apartments with the provision that she would live there as long as she lived. And I think the Poandl's are very, very good to her.

R. Terwilliger: Oh they are very kind. I know Mrs. Poandl and she is very comfortable there. But that was a restaurant at the time or just a hotel then?

Miss Halsey: Well, I suppose they served meals because in the early part of the century, Metuchen was a summer resort for some New Yorkers.

R. Terwilliger: You mentioned that and I really never realized that but I guess it was kind of coming out to the country from the city.

Miss Halsey: On the corner of Hillside, the Costas opened a small ice cream parlor. Mr. Costa and his brother were bricklayers and where they got their recipe for ice cream I don't know but people came from miles around for their spumoni and ice cream. Business increased so a larger shop was built. That building now houses Mr. Stort's, the Costa's son in law's, gift shop. That in time was outgrown and the factory was built at the railroad end of Pearl Street and then later they moved to Woodbridge. Mr. Hahn ran a drug store at, I think, the site of Wernik's Drug Store now. Mom and Pop, Papa Frank owned a variety store somewhere along there. It was a very spooky place, poorly lit by a couple of 25 watt bulbs but one could buy little wooden animals, wagons and so forth if one wanted to build a little farm with a barn made out of a soapbox and fences made of split clothespins.

R. Terwilliger: This I found very interesting. I haven't heard anyone talk about this improvisation in making your own things out of just things that were available. But that was really refreshing.

Miss Halsey: **I can remember having a farm and Howard Ayers had one, he lived in the next house, he had one.**

R. Terwilliger: But boxes, small boxes and things that were emptied from groceries were real treasures. I can even remember this and especially if it had the little cellophane cover that could possibly be a window. Remember some of the cookies had the cellophane?

Miss Halsey: **That was later than my time, this was just a solid wooden box.**

R. Terwilliger: I was so delighted to hear that you did this kind of thing. I wanted to mention to you while you're talking about this, something that made me recall. Old Mrs. Mundy who lived on Middlesex Avenue in the house that, I think— oh, what was the architect's name — who built, he either renovated this old house and then rented it out to the Mundy's. Not the Mundy's, the Chatman's. I'm sorry, it's the Chatman's. It's on the right hand side going toward Menlo Park. And I'm trying to think of people who lived in it after the Chatman's - the Littersts — not Litterst sisters....

Miss Halsey: **You don't mean the old house that Mr. Fairweather made into a nice house.**

R. Terwilliger: Right, that house. Well there were Mundy's in it when I was a girl. An old man and an old, I guess it was the grandfather and grandmother lived in one half and I played with Helen Chatman and I guess her mother must have been a Mundy and she married a Chatman. But the grandmother — the point being — she used to take hemlock tree branches and make doll furniture out of them and these darling little cushions for the seats. And we used to pick the little dried branches and they had kind of a rough finish on them, so it looked like almost alpine kind of furniture. She put them together with straight pins. And we would sit by the hour with her and watch her and she made me a whole dollhouse full of furniture. The dollhouse was nothing but old boxes. But this was a summer afternoon's project — was to sit and work on this dollhouse and curtains and furniture. And it just amazes me because children today don't know these kinds of things.

Miss Halsey: **They miss an awful lot not making their own toys.**

R. Terwilliger: And using their own imagination. I can remember for hours on our front porch just sitting and playing with this dollhouse. And then when paper dolls came around and you could trace the one paper doll you were fortunate enough to have been able to buy and make the whole family from this one pattern, I really feel bad that they've missed this kind of playing that we've had. So I'm sorry, I just had to talk about it.

Miss Halsey: There were cheap materials and kitchen utensils and so forth. Mama Frank looked just like pictures of an old witch and we were all rather frightened to go in there but we did, though not alone, for the small treasures. One of the Fire companies came next and Burrough's was on the corner just recently occupied by the travel service. The post office for years was just back of Burrough's and one had to ask at the window for one's mail. Then it was moved for a short time over on Main Street.

- Break in tape-

R. Terwilliger: I don't know what he does, he has someone in electronics; the voice repeat is much better on the final tape. I think we're into it now that you could start again

Miss Halsey: A new building was built, again back of Burrough's. I have here the laundry now occupies that but I looked the other day and it isn't. It's an antique shop.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes, Dolly's Antiques.

Miss Halsey: Is in that building. I don't know where the laundry went. And then the present structure was erected.

Among friends in school was Edith Campbell whose father was one of the owners of large clay banks, later bought by the government for Camp Raritan. At least once during the summer, Mr. Campbell would take Edith and me down to the clay banks so we could ride the donkey engine and paddle around the pond – I suppose a hole diluted of clay and filled with rain and seepage, on a raft that he had built for us. He was Christopher Columbus and we were the crew. And members of the Metuchen Club used to give an annual party for the children of the town in the clubhouse. I think that was Christmas. I don't really remember whether it was Christmas or summertime.

R. Terwilliger: I'm interested in the Metuchen Club – what was the Metuchen Club?

Miss Halsey: That's where the Masonic temple is now.

R. Terwilliger: Was this sort of like - or would a good reference to the same type of thing would be the Metuchen Country Club? Was it a local club?

Miss Halsey: Well of course they didn't have a golf course but they met there and they had dances and they had card parties. It was just a social club.

R. Terwilliger: Was there a fee involved to belong to the club?

Miss Halsey: Well, I suppose there must have been; they couldn't have managed the upkeep on that place unless there was.

R. Terwilliger: But your family – your mother did not belong?

Miss Halsey: No. I was just invited because all the kids in town were invited to the party as a rule. And of course I didn't care for that either. I don't think I went very often.

After graduating from Metuchen High School with the largest class ever – 19 members – I definitely did not want to go to college. I've never been very studious and couldn't be persuaded to go away from home for any length of time.

R. Terwilliger: Now let me stop you once more there and ask, was it unusual for a young lady to go away to school in your day or was this quite common?

Miss Halsey: I think by the time I got out, I think most of the girls in my class went on to college somewhere. And also during summer vacations they all went down to Newark and got jobs at the Prudential for the summer, which I never did either. I was always such a homebody, I don't know.

R. Terwilliger: I understand that too, I was and all my children were until they went away to school. I never did go away to school, I started at Douglas and married instead; I figured that way I could stay home.

Miss Halsey: Good idea. Miss Julia Bogart had taken over the position of librarian in the little building on Hillside Avenue. I can remember borrowing books there from Miss Ruth Thomas, whose desk was a kitchen table and sat in captain's chairs still in our library.

R. Terwilliger: Yes, I've seen that there and the thing I wanted to ask you was do you recall what kind of checking out system they had in the library then? Was it just some of the old date-stampers I've seen?

Miss Halsey: Well they had I guess just bought envelopes at the stationary store and pasted in the back and I guess just a little cardboard and she must have just written the names of people on; I really don't remember too much about it.

R. Terwilliger: Was there a time limit how long you could borrow the books?

Miss Halsey: That I don't remember either but I always took mine back so fast. I always was a fast reader and I can remember going in there once and taking in three or four books and having some one of the ladies in town saying to me, well, you haven't read

all those books in a week – or two weeks as the case may be. And I thought well it's none of your business what I do. But of course I didn't say anything. I really don't remember what the system was.

R. Terwilliger: Well, did she set up the system for the first library, Miss Thomas?

Miss Halsey: I suppose she must have.

R. Terwilliger: She was a pretty woman. I've seen pictures of her down at the library.

Miss Halsey: Yes, she was very sweet.

R. Terwilliger: A very, very sweet lovely lady.

Miss Halsey: But she was on in years and Miss Bogart had studied in New York. I think she was in the 42nd Street Library and of course her father had been minister here in the Reformed Church and they lived here so she took over. The library was open I think two or three afternoons a week from 2 to 5. When Miss Bogart took over she thought the library would be more popular if it was on the Main Street so the National Bank building having been built, that's now the professional building, the library was relocated on the second floor in three rooms. One was reasonably large and one of the smaller rooms was the children's room and the other was the workroom. Miss Bogart asked me if I would like to help in the library and I accepted. Business did pick up and we soon needed more room so we moved across the street to the second floor of the new Commonwealth Bank building. Then when the Borough Hall was built we were assigned quarters on the second floor there. Quarters consisted of one big room, a smaller room used as a workroom and in back of that an open attic where the magazine files were kept. It was most inconvenient, the roof was too low for me to stand upright and it was hot as Hades in the summertime and cold as Pharaoh's heart at wintertime. The little workroom overlooked the barred windows of the two small cells in the police department. And one day as I happened to look out I saw a young boy standing looking out of one of the cell windows. He looked up and saw me and said, "Oh, you and me both."

R. Terwilliger: I thought that was amusing.

Miss Halsey: Very much on my dignity, I simply turned away.

As the town grew the borough needed more space and they were eyeing our space with envy and when the late 1930s arrived and the WPA workers and money were available, Miss

Bogart, with others, worked very hard to get our attractive colonial building erected. The cornerstone is dated 1937.

R. Terwilliger: This was then part of the WPA project work plan?

Miss Halsey: Yes, they built Roosevelt Hospital and they built our library.

R. Terwilliger: I understand that – was it Mr. Fenton – he said he was involved in politics at the time and that was part of his project, one of his projects.

Miss Halsey: Aylin Pierson was the architect, I guess for both those buildings, the hospital and the library.

R. Terwilliger: I don't know what follows after this but I wanted to talk a little bit about the library. You know working there myself now and having been part of the library ever since a little girl here in town, what kind of a... the amount of books, can you ever remember? In the early days, say back in the early 30s was there a good amount of books, a wide variety?

Miss Halsey: I think Miss Bogart was an awfully good librarian; she was really excellent in her work. And as far back as I can remember there was always a Book Committee. There were five or six women and they met once a month and each one would come with a list of books that they thought would be advisable to buy. They would discuss these books and just decide whether or not they were to buy them. Of course, the book budget was limited but they had I think a very good selection and of course they could buy fiction because that was still a pay collection and it paid for itself. So that the money that the borough allocated for books went for non-fiction.

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting, you mean to read fiction there was a rental fee for the books?

Miss Halsey: Well yes, I suppose for the first four or five months and then they would come off as you bought, you took the older ones off. It started out at 2 cents a day and eventually worked up to as much as I think 5 cents a day. Of course Miss Bogart ordered other books too as I did. I mean I ordered things that I knew we needed without taking it up with the Book Committee but I always liked the book committee because I thought we got a very varied selection.

R. Terwilliger: Right, a good cross section.

Miss Halsey: What one person would think was appealing, somebody else might not and I might not and so I liked the Book Committee very much.

R. Terwilliger: How was the Book Committee formed, was this sort of an appointed kind of thing?

Miss Halsey: **Well yes, I don't know how it started originally; whether Miss Bogart picked them or not but I think that it - of course the women who were on it seemed to enjoy it very much.**

R. Terwilliger: It was all women then?

Miss Halsey: **At one time Dr. Behrenberg was on but I think he was only one year. And of course it met during the day so naturally it was women. Unless somebody moved away or died there weren't openings. But as I remember, we appointed our own. It was an invitation affair.**

R. Terwilliger: Very much as the Library Board is.

Miss Halsey: **Well the Board at that time...**

R. Terwilliger: Was there a Board besides this?

Miss Halsey: **Oh yes, there was the Library Board. And the Board almost invariably picked someone when someone was retiring and the Mayor would appoint him. Later it got to be one of the political plums and now I guess the Board doesn't have much to say about who's going to be on it, I really don't know.**

R. Terwilliger: Yes, it's strictly a political appointment.

Miss Halsey: **But when we first started it was an appointed job. And as I say, the people on the Board decided on someone who they thought would be an asset and suggested them.**

R. Terwilliger: Yes, a very library-oriented person. That's terribly important to the total success of a good library is a very well appointed Board and unfortunately quite often the appointments are not made with that in mind alone.

Miss Halsey: **We had Dr. Martin at one time and of course he had been librarian at a big library I think in Chicago and then he was connected with some library work in New York. I don't remember just what but there wasn't anything he didn't know about library work. And Mr. Ciardi was on our Board at one time.**

R. Terwilliger: We still to this day will have some of the older people that come into the library and they tell us they still preferred the old checking-out system because they could just take the card out of the book and see if they had read it. This was when you wrote your name in the back. And they say with this new system, unless you really

keep a private list – especially if you're a mystery reader or science fiction or had some special area where you could easily go through the collection we have; they will still complain to us.

Miss Halsey: **There are a lot of people who will make little checks through books. I do it myself.**

R. Terwilliger: Especially mystery readers.

Miss Halsey: **I see a little dot here and I think well, somebody else is checking off the books they've read.**

R. Terwilliger: I think you'd almost have to because, as I say, outside of keeping a private list which I think we all forget to do or will not write it down.

Miss Halsey: **We do in the library**

R. Terwilliger: So they do have their own little checking system, which we don't mind at all. The circulation is the important thing. Never as a young girl and seeing lovely Miss Halsey in the library did I ever think I would be on the other side of the desk seeing Miss Halsey check out books from me. Okay, please continue.

Miss Halsey: **The cornerstone is dated 1937. This finally became inadequate and in the middle 60s the trustees started talking addition. I was not willing to take part in this headache for two reasons. One, I was nearing retirement age, and two, I thought that my successors should have his or her ideas incorporated in the new building rather than having to put up with my ideas. The last summer that we were in the Borough Hall I started four years of summer school at Hillwood Lakes on the outskirts of Trenton, which is Trenton State College, so that I was qualified to take over after Miss Bogart retired.**

R. Terwilliger: You went just summers to do this?

Miss Halsey: **Four summers, yes**

R. Terwilliger: You worked through the winter and went to school – did you work along with going to school?

Miss Halsey: **Well no, this was my vacation and Miss Bogart was so nice to work for. I never had a chance to go anywhere or wanted an afternoon off that wasn't perfectly alright. And of course I was working by the hour then so it didn't make any difference.**

R. Terwilliger: But she was a lovely woman. We should talk about her a little bit. She was scary to me as a little girl.

Miss Halsey: She was very abrupt in her speech and very nervous in her actions. People used to say to me, “I don’t understand how you can work with her.” And I said, “She gets on my nerves occasionally but she’s awfully nice to work for. She’s so considerate and so appreciative. Anything I ever did was spoken of appreciatively.” Now in fact, as I say, all this time off if I wanted time off. But she was an awfully nervous temperament and she had a way of sort of thrusting books on people that she thought they should read.

R. Terwilliger: This is what I was going to mention.

Miss Halsey: Which didn’t go over and she was so insistent that they would take them home.

R. Terwilliger: You had to.

Miss Halsey: To avoid an argument. Whether they read them or not of course that was something else again. But she really was an excellent librarian and an excellent worker and..

R. Terwilliger: Underneath that façade of being very stern and very much library oriented, there was a lovely sweet woman that every once in a while.... I don’t recall what it was but I remember there was a group of us in there one day after school and we were reading something she didn’t approve of. I won’t even mention what we were reading but she came over to the table and she collected the books up that we had out. And she said, “Now I’ll show you what you should be reading”, and she brought out these other books and put them down and said, “Now this is what you should be reading.” We of course very properly started to read what she put in front of us. And she said, “And I don’t want to see you looking in that corner again.” We were about 12 or 13 and curious about what made young ladies be young ladies and this kind of thing. And she was very upset with us because we were curious and she said, “If you want to know that sort of thing, you go home and talk to your mother.” And then there was a twinkle in her eye as she walked away like she really understood but she had to make sure that whatever we were doing in the library was in complete approval.

Miss Halsey: She had the best interests of the public at heart. There is no doubt about that.

R. Terwilliger: And she was a dear woman, she really was

Miss Halsey: She was a character.

R. Terwilliger: That’s right, she was a town character. She was one of those people like so many others – or so few really – that had her own special personality. How long did you work for her?

Miss Halsey: I went in the year I graduated in 1920 in June and I started working in September of that year and I worked right straight through until she retired. I don't remember the year she retired. I think I was librarian for 19 years; I can't remember how many years I was head librarian.

R. Terwilliger: I was trying to think of how long I can remember. I was in high school in the forties and graduated as a matter of fact in '48 and I don't remember seeing her. She probably retired. I think you were librarian for all of my high school years. Was it Miss Lane that worked with you?

Miss Halsey: Yes, she came in.

R. Terwilliger: Were you there alone for a while after Miss Bogart retired?

Miss Halsey: No, I think I always had help, hourly help. I remember Mrs. Plechner, Richard Plechner the lawyer's mother, she lived right back of the library and her husband was in the Second World War, in fact he was killed in the Second World War and she worked for me. And Peggy Potter, Peggy Potter worked for me. Oh I don't remember.

R. Terwilliger: There must have been a variety but it seems I can remember just you most of the time when I would go in. I've always been very library oriented and very much enjoyed it.

Miss Halsey: Mrs. Coffet worked for quite a while. Then there was Mr. & Mrs. Talman who lived in town for a while and Mrs. Talman worked for a while. And then of course Mrs. Burda starting working for me in the children's room. I had a succession of assistants.

R. Terwilliger: And you enjoyed your years as librarian?

Miss Halsey: Yes, I really did, I liked it very much.

R. Terwilliger: I suppose, much as we see now in the library, there are library people. The same people, like good customers, good patrons we call them. It is the same group that comes back and back and I have always said I wish we could do things in the library to bring in those people that don't come to the library or feel intimidated by a library for some reason or other. I've had people say that to me. This is why they've started to have the Open House so maybe people would feel more comfortable about coming into this building for the first time. I think they are intimidated maybe by some of the systems, of how you have to check a book out.

Miss Halsey: I know, of course when I was there the town was so much smaller and everybody seemed to know everybody else and

they'd come in the library and they would see their friends there and they knew us and it was more personal. And of course as the library grows you can't have that personal touch. You don't have the time really.

R. Terwilliger: This is my biggest battle and I think Lee's greatest criticism of me, being a local person, I want to visit over the counter and it's not that way anymore. You just can't do it. And she's absolutely right that I shouldn't but being a local person many people feel they want to visit with me when they come in.

Miss Halsey: They appreciate that sort of thing, they really do.

R. Terwilliger: But I think I've gotten it under control now after a year and people know a few minutes of my time is fine but I am working.

Miss Halsey: Had you had library experience?

R. Terwilliger: Only in that I worked in the high school library and volunteered down in the library for a while. But I have no college education or library work. I went in there mostly to plan the programs for the library. This is the kind of thing I did for another place here in town called Venture Theater who did in-school programs. I think I told Lee I thought I could handle with the contacts with people I knew locally that I might be able to plan some interesting programs. And I really enjoyed it. It's been a great learning experience for me. But this isn't my tape – this is yours.

Miss Halsey: There were activities other than being a librarian. I had been a member of the Presbyterian choir since high school days and had had some voice lessons so I took part in old folks concerts organized every year or so by Mr. Luther Riddle, grandfather of the band leader Nelson Riddle. There was also an organization in New York that would put on musicals. As I remember they provided the scenery and some of the costumes and a director who would come out and work at length with the principals and then whip the chorus line into shape. By this time the present theater had been built on the corner of Bissett Place and Main Street and that with the stage at the YMCA furnished good places for any such performances. We were fortunate in having a number of good voices for the leads, among them the Crowell's, Edith, Louise, Malcolm and Ramsey. Each sang a different part and they formed an excellent quartet. And then Mrs. George Kelly, Ellen and Kelly Thompson's mother, had a beautiful contralto voice.

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember a woman by the name of Mrs. Mean? Someone mentioned that she took part in a lot of the minstrels that took place in town. She was down from South Main Street. I don't remember her first name but it was a German family.

Miss Halsey: Well, we had a lot of people with good voices and we had to make our own fun in those days and we did. Radio was just coming in and we didn't have television and people did that sort of thing. In the winter there was skating on Redfield Pond, which was in a lovely woods where Redfield Village now stands and Daniel's Hill furnished sled and toboggan runs, the hill being at the end of Hillside Avenue just before the land now occupied by the Methodist Church. Care to be taken not to finish one's run on the railroad tracks. During the 1914-1918 war we were overrun with soldiers from Camp Raritan. Everyone did what they could to entertain our boys - dances on the post, arrangement to entertain men on Sundays and holidays. There was a center at the camp where people who were willing to entertain could call. We almost always had two or three for dinner on Sundays. Believe it or not some of the soldiers used to come up to church and would almost always be invited home with different church members. A small service club was set up in the house next to the corner store on Main and Amboy. That store in the early part of the century was a grocery store and the opposite corner where the gas station is was a feed and grain store for there were still horses and people also kept chickens. And at Christmas time we bought our tree there at the cost of 35 or 50 cents.

R. Terwilliger: That seems incredible.

Miss Halsey: The service club was not much more than a place to wait for the trolley back to camp. There was a pool table and a few books and magazines and my mother was in charge of it for a time.

R. Terwilliger: Did you work with her there at the service club?

Miss Halsey: I'd go over for dances and things like that yes.

R. Terwilliger: Did you remember meeting any interesting people - an of these young men that were traveling on? How far away did they come from?

Miss Halsey: We corresponded with ones from out in Illinois, Michigan, and Lincoln, Nebraska. A lot of the fellows out there toward the end of the war were not in the first group. I mean they were fellows that had to wear glasses and things like that but they worked out there in the capacity of clerical jobs I guess - that sort of thing. And of course they still had to have guards out there because they still had a big ammunition dump out there. We got quite friendly with many of them.

R. Terwilliger: Did they correspond when they went overseas to France?

Miss Halsey: Well most of those fellows didn't go overseas because it was toward the end of the war but they had to be kept on.

R. Terwilliger: Did you ever go out to the center itself and do any of these little ...?

Miss Halsey: Out to the camp?

R. Terwilliger: Yes.these little entertainments.

Miss Halsey: Oh sure, they had dances out there and I can remember when the war first started, one night they had a huge entertainment in a field, somewhere out South Main Street – it wasn't so well built up there – but they built a platform out there and they had all these famous New York artists come out to entertain. I don't remember that they ever did that except just the once but they had weekly dances out on the post.

R. Terwilliger: I wonder how many of those men or soldiers at that time ever came back and settled in Metuchen, having seen this lovely part of

Miss Halsey: I'll tell you one - Lake from the post office. I don't know where he came from but he was a soldier here. I remember we used to have dances here.

R. Terwilliger: In the house here?

Miss Halsey: Sure, and we used to hear from some of those boys after they went back home.

R. Terwilliger: But he actually came back?

Miss Halsey: He's the only one I remember that settled here. There probably were others. As I say I don't really remember.

R. Terwilliger: Well it sounds like another world to hear your story of growing up in Metuchen.

Miss Halsey: It was another world.

R. Terwilliger: We've come a long way and I do hope, especially in that one section of the tape where you talk about sitting at Woodwild because your mother would probably not believe the amount of cars that go by those gates daily now. Someone gave me a count recently which just made my head spin. But there still is for maybe you and I and many of the other older people here, something very precious yet about this town. If you can kind of close out what we don't like and hang on to what is still lovely.

Miss Halsey: I remember when it used to be a nice old country town.

R. Terwilliger: I do thank you so much Miss Halsey for taking this time.

Miss Halsey: I enjoyed that I remembered so many things when I started to do this that I had forgotten over the years.

R. Terwilliger: This is what so many of the people say, once they sat down and really put their mind to recalling, it's amazing how all events seem to follow in order and in fact the recall is enjoyable.

Miss Halsey: Have you talked to Dolly Buchanan?

R. Terwilliger: We just did her. You'll have to hear her tape. I think we are going to close this off now; we are just about to end.

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