

Reflections of Metuchen

By Jadwin Sortore

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I live at 355 Main Street, Metuchen. I was born in 1937 which makes me on this cold, snowy January morning of 1999, sixty-one years old. I'm going to tell you some stories about Metuchen as I remember growing up here as a boy and some anecdotes and so forth that may be of interest to someone sometime from a historical standpoint.

First I want to talk about Metuchen schooling as I remember it and in some ways draw some comparisons to today's school. Being born in 1937, which was winding up the end of the depression I guess, we lived in pretty comfortable conditions here in Metuchen. Nothing extravagant but then I don't remember missing meals or bread lines and so forth that people endured in the early 30's. So being born in 1937, my first year to enter school was the year 1942. I don't really remember anything about World War II except I do recall my parents discussing the fall of Batavia, which now the city's name is changed to Jakarta, Indonesia. My mother's family was of Dutch extraction and Indonesia was then owned by the Dutch. And the Japanese conquered that city along with the rest of Indonesia and I can remember my parents discussing it. But I don't remember Pearl Harbor or any of the events in early World War II.

I do quite clearly though remember my days at Washington School in Metuchen. In those days, Campbell School had not been built so children from the south end of Metuchen went to Edgar School, from the north end of Metuchen went to Franklin School and those in the middle went to Washington School. Washington School has subsequently been renamed Moss School in honor of its long time principal, Dr. Mildred Moss, and I will be discussing her a little bit later.

In any event, September 1942 rolls around and off goes Jadwin along with a number of other five year olds to Washington School. The kindergarten teacher at that time was a woman by the name of Miss Brewster. And Miss Brewster had been the kindergarten teacher ever since the school was built and she was

kindergarten teacher long after I left. So she saw literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Metuchen children at the age of five. Her class was half-day like I guess most kindergartens are today. And I can remember the first day went pretty good for me and then the second day came and I was really unhappy. I hollered and I cried and put up quite a fuss and so the school authorities called my mother and said, "Come to Washington School and get your son Jadwin." Well my mother was, let's say, a rather strict disciplinarian and she did not like at all this coming to Washington School to get her son. So I was brought home and she said, "If you want to act like a baby, you'll be treated like a baby. Go to your room and we'll lock the door. Cry all you want to in there like a baby and when you get hungry I'll feed you baby food." Well I hollered and cried and pouted a good part of the afternoon and finally by later on I remember saying, "I'm all done now. I'm ready to go to school." So I came out, had supper, went to bed, got up the next day and went to school and never complained from then on out to the many years of schools I eventually wound up with. That's where I would consider using our former friend Newt Gingrich's phrase of "tough love" and it worked in my case.

One of the things I can remember about being in kindergarten and the early grades at Washington School were air raid drills. Of course in those days we were at war with Japan, Germany and Italy and there was a real threat of one of those countries – particularly Germany – being able to attack us with bombs. So the children in the school were taught what to do in an air raid. We would file out in an orderly fashion, get along the strong interior walls of the basement of Washington School, put our backs to the wall and put our heads between our knees until the all-clear sounded. It seems like we would sit down there for ten or fifteen minutes on the floor. And in my recollection anyway, there was no fooling around and people took it quite seriously because of the war time threat.

In those days we lived under rationing and I can remember my mother having a book of coupons. You could only buy so much sugar and so much coffee and my father's gasoline was rationed. He could only get five gallons of gasoline a month because the priorities for all food and gasoline and rubber and that kind of thing was to go to the military because the United States was faced with a very real and serious threat.

Well kindergarten finished up for me and then I can remember going into first grade where our first grade teacher was Dr. Mildred Moss. Dr. Moss not only was the first grade teacher but she was also the principal of the school. So she would be teaching a class in her classroom and the phone would ring in the principal's office, which was right next to her classroom, and she'd leave the room and answer the phone and do principal's business and then come back and continue on with her lesson. And over the years evidently her reputation grew and grew in the town and county and state as an educator and eventually, and I don't know when it was, the name was changed from Washington School to Moss School.

Dr. Moss lived in the brick house right next to the Presbyterian manse and each day of course would walk to school and walk home. She was considered, at least by my parents and friends of theirs, as being kind of an unusual woman. For example, she would keep her wreath up – or she and her husband would keep their Christmas wreath up well into June. It would always hang from the steel or iron balcony above the front door of that house.

But I remember her as a good teacher, certainly not the best teacher I had in that school, but a good teacher and one that we liked going to class with. In first grade we started – maybe it wasn't first grade but somewhere along there – we started to have kids would have control over the opening of school every day. And each day began with a reading from the Bible, one of the psalms, the Lord's Prayer and a Salute to the Flag. Everyone took part and there was never any problem or discussion that no one wanted to do it. It seemed like it was just part of the ritual of the day.

Well, the years at Washington School sort of sped by. I spent seven years in that school. The building was much smaller then. If you look at the building now closely you'll see that there have been additions put on that make it quite a bit larger. But at the time it was large enough for the children of the neighborhood.

The playground was quite big and we would use that depending on the season of the year for choose-up football games or baseball games in the spring and then

the basketball courts were put in that center section outside and we would play basketball. Or another game that kids used to like to play in those days – they would draw the baseball strike zone on the wall and then one person would bat with a broomstick and the other would pitch. Depending on where you hit it, it would count as a single or an out or a home run and so forth. That was called stickball by Metuchen standards.

In the sixth grade, I guess it was because of school overcrowding or some problem, all the sixth grade children from Edgar School were brought to Washington School. So the population grew a little bit and we got introduced to new kids from south Metuchen that we'd never known before and a lot of new friendships developed.

Probably the best teacher I had, or the best teacher I had, in Washington School was a woman by the name of Mrs. Coe, C-o-e. And Mrs. Coe was a the sixth grade social studies teacher and I can remember quite clearly her instruction and what she asked us to read and do and projects we had to work on. Being introduced to a lot of things that I'd never been aware of before like ancient history, dinosaurs, the Romans, geography, these kinds of subjects spurred my interest to further study these areas. She was a real good teacher and I liked her classes a lot. She had the basement room in the southwest corner of the building. That's where we had our classes with her. I don't know what's in there now.

In those days, although it wasn't a widespread practice but it still existed, if a student really got out of line it was perfectly acceptable for the teacher to whack them, not with a closed fist or anything but with a ruler or a slap or something to calm the child down and get it focused on what should be done.

I remember one particular instance quite clearly. We had a third grade teacher by the name of Miss O'Hara. She must have had a fiery Irish temper because she had all her records laid out on her desk one afternoon and a boy that I still see in Metuchen occasionally approached her desk and accidentally bumped a flower vase and the water spilled all over these records. Now this was before ball point pens had been invented so everything was done in pen and ink and all the records

were ruined. She picked up her ruler and whacked him across the ear about as hard as she could and he sat down and whimpered a little bit but that was about it. Probably it taught him a lesson he'll never forget to be extra special careful around people and important things and so forth. But that was a rare event. It wasn't widespread, I don't think; at least what I remember.

Washington School also had a janitor named Jim. Jim was a popular guy with the kids and Jim had a 1930's car, the kind with the big teardrop headlights on it and big fenders and running boards. And if we were playing in the playground outside after school, it was considered a thing to do that Jim would start his car up and all the kids would run over and jump on the running board or hang onto the teardrop lights. And we'd race across the playground out to almost Bounty Street where he'd stop and we'd all get off and go back to play whatever we were doing and Jim would head on home. Of course today if a janitor did that with his car, first of all he'd be crazy and second of all, the parents would probably complain and sue him and he'd be fired the next day. But that was considered part of growing up and playing at school was to ride on Jim's running board as he headed home about 4 o'clock each afternoon.

The school day in those days was quite a bit different than today. First of all, and I have no statistics to back this up, probably there were a lot more mothers at home in the 1940's than there are today, even though there was a great opportunity for factory work and chances for women to work because all the men were in the service, or many of the men were in the service. Nevertheless, what happened was you'd go to school – and we all walked to school or rode a bike – you'd walk to school and school began around 9:00 a.m. and by noon you'd be released for lunch. And to my recollection anyway, the vast majority of children would go home for lunch, have a sandwich with their mother and maybe brothers and sisters and then be back at school by 1:00 for the afternoon session. I don't really remember people taking their lunch unless it was a real bad day with heavy rain or something and people sat at their desks and ate a sandwich. But most of the children went home for lunch. Even people that lived as far away as ... for example, I had a friend that lived on the corner of Elm Avenue and Linden Avenue and he was assigned to Washington School and he went home for lunch everyday

from Washington School to that spot and then back to Washington School again. So maybe we had a little bit more than an hour for lunch, I don't remember exactly.

We used to play a lot of games after school – pick-up type games where a bunch of boys would go to field behind the Presbyterian Social Center or Washington School playground or maybe in the street in Bisette Place by the Metuchen movie theater, Forum Theater, and choose up sides and play the sport of the season. And this was all without parental supervision and without a lot of extra equipment. For example, for touch football we had just a football and maybe a little thing to kick extra points – if we had one to set the ball into. But that was a good way I think to grow up and for kids to learn the rules of sport and how to get along with each other. What I have observed today is probably the children are better athletes but they always seem to have to have an adult coaching them or refereeing for them and parents on the sidelines yelling and so forth where we were more or less free to go and do as we wanted.

I would cross as a kid everyday, for an example, Main Street. And you can imagine letting a five or six year old cross Main Street three or four times a day without any supervision today would be crazy because there is so much traffic and people go so much faster. But in those days it was not a problem.

After sixth grade was completed we all went to Franklin School – Edgar School, Franklin School and Washington School all combined for seventh and eighth grade in the old Franklin School building. This was a big change for us but, in my case anyway, it seemed to go pretty smoothly. There's where I met and had for classes the second good teacher that I can remember growing up - Mrs. Jessen. And Mrs. Jessen, who was the mother of Martin Jessen here in Metuchen, lived on Main Street in the white house right at the foot of Clinton Place. She taught arithmetic and mathematics to seventh and eighth graders. She was also my homeroom teacher both years. And she was another teacher that would whack a kid if he got greatly out of line. But kids respected her and even to the point where we would like to walk to school with her and talk about various things not related to school or to class and then have her as a teacher. She walked to school

everyday from her home on Main Street and I think walked home for lunch most every day.

Whoever was in charge of Franklin School then had a pretty good plan because the high school people were on the upper floor and the seventh and eighth graders were on the middle floor and somehow they put in some elementary children; I'm not quite sure how that worked. And eventually Campbell School was built to take the elementary load out of the Franklin School building. In seventh and eighth grade we began to get our first jobs. I'll talk about that a little bit later because I want to concentrate on the school now if I can. After sixth grade there was no graduation ceremony and after eighth grade there was no graduation ceremony. I know that's quite a common practice now when children go to an upper level, some sort of a graduation ceremony but that was not the case in those days.

And now we enter Metuchen High School as ninth graders. In my case the year was 1949, September of 1949. And one of the things I do remember happening in that particular time was in June of 1950 the Korean War started. And most people it seems didn't even know where Korea was; you had to go get an atlas and look on the map to see where it was. In those days we had the military draft. So a lot of young men from Metuchen who were serving in the military or were about to serve in the military, particularly in post-war peacetime duty, suddenly we in an active unit and posted off to fight in Korea. A number of other people had finished their service in World War II and had elected to stay in the active reserve. It provided a little extra spending money and you kept current with skills. And these reservists were, for the most part, 100% activated.

So a number of the names that you see on the right hand side as you go into Borough Hall, men who served in World War II, a number of those men were reactivated for Korea. I had a friend, for example, who had served not in World War II but served in 1947 and 1948 as a military mailman. And upon completion of his service he said to himself, "This isn't too bad a deal. I think I'll stay in the reserves and go to a meeting one night a week." And he did and of course Korea came along. He was activated and posted not to another military postal unit but to

an actual front-line division and spent a couple of years being shot at and shooting back and being wounded and generally having quite a rough two years in Korea. That started in 1950. I can remember it came as a great shock to everyone, none of us, or none of the adults anyway, expected this.

Metuchen High School introduced us to a number of new things which heretofore were not available - clubs to join, sports to play, theater groups and what have you to get involved with. And in those days, of course, there was no high school in what's now Edison. Edison was then known as Raritan Township and the children from Raritan Township went to the larger established schools. For example, if you lived out near where Tops is now, you went to Highland Park High School. If you lived down towards Fords, you went to Woodbridge High School, I guess, and Rahway and Plainfield. The children who lived out along New Durham Road and all the way over to Newmarket all came to Metuchen. So each day a number of school buses would roll in with children from these areas which were at that time very rural. For example where Hadley Mall is now, out in Piscataway I guess it is, was Hadley Airport and it was quite a good-sized small plane airport, as I remember. There were three or four big hangars and a number of airplanes and we used to like going out there. You could walk around and look at things up close and it was quite a fun way to be introduced to aviation.

And then that whole New Durham Road from that corner out there all the way into Metuchen were small truck farms where families would have a few acres and grow high cash crops like vegetables to be sold in the local markets or even into New York. Those areas have now been all plowed under and they are either factory warehouse distribution points or condominiums, particularly in the case of the Hale property which was a beautiful farm years ago, right there by Talmadge Road.

But those children would come into Metuchen and they added a lot of variety to the school life because they were from different backgrounds and different children and added to the overall good of our school environment. One of the classes I can remember that we all looked forward to in Metuchen High School was the approximately fifty minutes or so that we would spend in gym class. And

one of the big differences between 1999 and 1953 was how these gym classes are conducted. Today if you go to a school - at least the school I was in Linden and I think they are all that way in the state of New Jersey now – gym classes are co-ed so the boys and girls play sports together. However, years ago, the boys went their way and the girls went their way. All were required to dress for gym. The girls had to buy and wear a white bloomer-type outfit. And then the young women were taught and expected to play in sports like track and softball and volleyball, more or less what were known as women’s sports then. And the boys were expected to play football, baseball, wrestling, boxing, basketball, roping-climbing and were taught the rules of these sports.

One of the sports that I remember quite clearly was a wintertime sport that we would be doing - boxing. From those days until now I still marvel at the stamina that a boxer, for example as you watch on television, has. Because they would put us in a ring and we would have to fight three two-minute rounds with a boy approximately our size and weight. So we’d fight two minutes and then two other boys would get in and box for two minutes, and then we’d go two minutes – so you’d fight three two-minute rounds. After those six minutes I can remember being so tired and battered around and exhausted, I can just imagine what someone who goes fifteen three-minutes rounds must feel like.

We would have rope-climbing where we had to shimmy up the rope and touch the top of the gym and then shimmy back down again. It was a great way to spend energy as a teenager and also to learn something about these various sports. And then upon completion of the gym class, in the last five minutes or so, you were expected to go to the locker room and strip down and take a shower in a very public shower area with eight or ten spigot heads. You’d run in there and take a quick shower and run back out again. The gym teacher would stand by the door with his marking book and every time you took a shower he’d put a notation in his book. And if you took showers for the marking period you would be eligible then for a 90, or even a 95 I guess. If you didn’t take a shower, I think the highest you could get was a 70. If you played a varsity sport, which I did for quite a bit of the time I was in high school, you didn’t have to take gym. You could take a study hall or you could still take gym but you’d still get your 90. So if you played a sport

you got a 90 or if you took showers you got a 90 ... a pretty interesting system. And I would say 90% of the boys would take a shower. You'd have to bring your own towel and stuff and take it home for washing – nothing was provided.

So that was our gym class and before we had a gym class or before we played any sports you had to be certified by the school doctor. And for a number of years the school doctor was Dr. Wittmer. Dr. Wittmer's office was in the brick building right next to the Metuchen Public Library and he would examine you and certify you as okay for sports. Dr. Wittmer left Metuchen probably in the early 1960's to retire.

One of the big events that takes place in any teen-ager's life is turning seventeen and getting your driver's license. It's certainly a big thing today and it was a big thing back in the 1950's. So in September 1954 I turned seventeen and passed my driver's test. One of the reasons I passed the driver's test was the excellent instruction given by the Driver's Ed teacher, Miss Kroll. Metuchen High School had a Pontiac from the Pontiac dealer which is now where See-More Electronics has his store – that was a Pontiac agency. And the car had the regular driver's wheel on the left hand side and then Miss Kroll had a brake and clutch on the passenger side. So if you started to get into big trouble, she could jam on the brakes or use the clutch for you. So there would be four of us, there'd be three sitting in the back seat and the driver and Miss Kroll and couple of days a week instead of taking gym you'd take this class. And it helped you get your driver's license and also it taught a lot of safety tips that I still remember today when I drive. So that was a good part of the school as I remember it.

In the senior year now came the time to decide what we were going to do after school. In Metuchen High School in those days children were put on three different tracks depending on their wishes and their abilities. The basic track was what they called General Education and they took all the same subjects but they weren't as complex, I suppose. The second track was Commercial and this was mainly for young women who wanted to work in an office. So they were taught typing and office skills and stenography and so forth. And the third and final track was the Academic track for those children that were planning on going to college after high school. I don't know what the percentages were but in those

days around Metuchen were a lot of factories so there were pretty good paying jobs. And so a lot of kids, particularly from large families that couldn't afford a college education, would be taking the General track. They'd get their degree or diploma and then go to work in a factory. And right outside of Metuchen High School, right there going toward New Durham Road, was a big factory that made Celotex wall board. A number of people from Metuchen worked there and made pretty good money for factory work. That's all closed now, at least in 1999 the building sits empty. Most of those manufacturing jobs are gone now. You only have to take the train to Newark and look out the window and see all the empty factory buildings that once employed hundreds and maybe thousands of people. But they're all gone overseas. If you're looking for factory work, you'd probably have to go a long way to find a factory to employ you.

Anyway, of our 160 children in the senior class of 1955 probably 50 or so, 60 maybe were in the Academic track. I know today it's much different. Almost every senior in Metuchen High School, or 90% of them anyway, go on to some kind of secondary education but it didn't used to be that way. Nor to help you decide on college, we didn't really have a guidance department but the history teacher, Mr. Nickett, acted as the guidance helper. Behind his desk he had a shelf full of college catalogues and you'd look through there and see what appealed to you and what each college offered. In my case I liked Lafayette. It was a school that was a good school, not too far away; about an hour and a half drive up in Easton, and had a lovely campus I thought. So I applied there and in March or April of my senior year was accepted and that's where I eventually went. To give you an idea of the tuition costs, in 1955 tuition at Lafayette was \$750 a year and the minimum wage in 1955 was 85 cents an hour. Now the minimum wage is about \$6.00 an hour but the cost of going to Lafayette has jumped from \$750 a year to something like pretty close to \$30,000, that's \$30,000, a year! So college costs have become astronomical compared to what they were just a few decades ago.

In those days in Metuchen when we were in high school there was it seemed a lot of building going on. If you look at some of the houses as you walk around Metuchen, or drive around Metuchen, you'll see that in the early fifties, late forties

and early fifties, a number of new developments were put in and a lot of new people came to town. Jefferson Park apartments, for example, was built in that period of time. A lot of the people that came to Jefferson Apartments were from the middle of Pennsylvania when the big factory moved out to Route 27 across from where Revlon is now. Hundreds of families moved down to work in that factory.

Another thing we did in high school, all four years of high school, which was a great idea - I don't know whether they have anything like it today - but it seemed like it was one Saturday night a month or maybe two Saturday nights a month, at the YMCA we would have what were known as Co-ed Dances or Co-ed Night. So upstairs there were the pool tables and ping-pong tables to use, the swimming pool was open and on the gym floor, records were played and people could dance. And the parents of the children involved would take turns being chaperones. I remember my parents once or twice a year would go up and be chaperones at the Co-eds, as they were called. And it seems like it was a quarter or fifty cents to get in and all the facilities of the Y were open for use. And kids really had a good time; it was like 7:30 to 11:30 or something like that. And the boys would stand on the one wall and the girls would stand along the other wall and the boys, when they got up enough courage, would walk over and ask a girl to dance. And if it was a Sadie Hawkins Dance then the girls would come over and ask the boys to dance.

So it was a much more innocent time in those days, I think, than what I know we have today. For example, in all my time at Metuchen High School, I cannot remember one girl getting pregnant. And I suppose there are a number of reasons for this. The religion was a lot stronger then, parental supervision was a lot stronger. We didn't have welfare so if a girl did have a baby it was her responsibility - or the boy if he could be tracked down - to pay for it and raise it and educate it and buy it shoes and clothes and so forth. So girls just didn't get pregnant. And that's certainly opposite to what we have now. As a former recent teacher in Linden - they were five girls in one class pregnant at the same time. And these are girls fifteen years old or less. So things have really changed in that regard.

Another thing I remember from Metuchen was that very few kids dropped out of school. And if they did drop out it was a change to go to one of the county vocational schools, either the vocational school in New Brunswick or Perth Amboy. It really wasn't quitting school and just hanging out. It was changing for vocational reasons.

Well, they were really happy days, I think, and I remember about that time rock n' roll music came in with Elvis Presley and it was sort of a music revolution – that's what it was, a music revolution and children started acting differently.

In June of 1955 we had our graduation outside at Edgar Field. And following graduation we had an all-night party at the YMCA with dancing and breakfast at about 4 or 5 am, all trying to keep kids from racing off someplace in their cars and killing themselves, because that was a quite frequent event - maybe not in Metuchen but you'd read about it in the paper from other schools.

Of the class of '55, about 160 of us graduated and we all went our separate ways. We've seen each other from time to time over the years; we've had reunions. A couple of the years I was the class reunion chairman and arranged a couple of our reunions. Probably the best – not probably but the best reunion that I can remember of all of them was in April 1988 when we opened up old Metuchen High School and had a six hour dinner and dance party in the old school gymnasium and got to see a lot of the other classes at the same time.

That's one thing I forgot to mention that we did in those days in Metuchen High School. I forget how often it was but I'm going to say one or two Friday noontimes a month, the gym would have a dance at noontime. So from 12 to 1 somebody played records and the guys and girls went down there and danced and jitterbugged and generally had a pretty nice time. It seemed like the cheerleaders ran that or had something to do with it. I'm not too certain.

Cheerleaders in those days were - that was about the pinnacle of success that a young woman could achieve and being on the varsity football team was about the

pinnacle of success that a young man could achieve. Football games in high school were very highly attended; almost everybody went to the game. The stands at Edgar Field were packed to the point where a lot of people couldn't sit down, you had to stand up. I've been to a number of games at Linden when I was a teacher up there and it's totally opposite now. Whether television has stopped it or the malls have stopped it, I don't know but people just don't attend games like they used to unless you have a child on the team or a child in the band.

But I can safely say in summing up Metuchen High School and Metuchen education in general that I got a good education and the system was fair and the system very nicely prepared me for later responsibilities in life as I found them. I look back on my school days as generally very happy ones and very fulfilling days. So with that little summary of Metuchen education in the late forties and fifties I will sign off and try to think of some more anecdotes that came up and maybe people don't do anymore and some people might find interesting to hear how we did it in those days. Anyway, thanks for listening and as we would say in England – TTFN, which stands for Ta-Ta-For-Now. Bye.