

Jeannette Rolfe

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno
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Abstract: Jeannette Belle (Ley) Rolfe (1892-1986), often referred to as “Jane,” was one of six children born to William Sandford Ley Sr. and Jennie “Jane” (Cain) Ley. Born and raised in Ohio, Ms. Rolfe and her family moved to Elizabeth where she attended Vail-Dean School. Following graduation in 1910, Ms. Rolfe went to business school with her sister and then became a legal secretary for seven years where she worked for former Governor Foster McGowan Voorhees and Judge Clark McKinley Whittemore, president of the Union County Trust Company.

In 1917, she married John Henry Rolfe (1890-1946), often referred to as “Jack,” and they settled in Metuchen at 68 Graham Avenue. Mr. Rolfe was the son of Isiah Rolfe, former commander of the Fugle Hummer Post 65, American Legion, and he was an automobile dealer in New Brunswick. They had one child: Barbara (Rolfe) Prettyman. The Rolfe family struggled during the Depression and Mr. Rolfe died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six in 1946. Following her husband’s death, Ms. Rolfe earned a living by working in stock control at the Raritan Arsenal, working as receptionist at the Middlesex Hospital and the Roosevelt Hospital, and working as a babysitter. Ms. Rolfe was a member of the First Presbyterian Church and the Metuchen Club. She is buried in the First Presbyterian Church Cemetery in Metuchen alongside her husband.

In this interview, Ms. Rolfe discusses her husband, the various jobs she held throughout her life, the effect of the Depression on her family, and life after her husband’s death. She talks extensively about her recollections of Metuchen including shopping at various businesses, the Metuchen Club, her neighbors including Governor Silzer’s family, and her memories of Pastor Behrenberg of the First Presbyterian Church.

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P. Bruno: Today is January 12, 1978 and this is Paula Bruno interviewing Mrs. [Jeannette Belle (Ley)] Rolfe. [SLIDES 1 and 2]

Okay, why don’t we start with your marriage to your husband [John Henry Rolfe] in 1917, how you met your husband, and about his business.

J. Rolfe: Yes, well, I met him at a Vail-Deane dance. We moved from Ohio and I had my senior year in Vail-Deane [School in Elizabeth]. And it was at one of these dances that I met him, and that was in 1910. And we weren’t married until 1917 because

in the meantime, our father died and I went to business school and so did my sister. Then I got a job as a legal secretary to Judge [Clark McKinley] Whittemore in Elizabeth. And I'm very glad I had that because a lot of my friends don't know anything about accounting, and it's a big help.

P. Bruno: And you met your husband, and how about your husband's business?

J. Rolfe: Well, he was in the automobile business for himself. He was with that Martin Company¹ in New Brunswick. What was the name of it, that made airplanes?

P. Bruno: Oh, I don't know.

J. Rolfe: That was before your time. Well anyway, he ended up in the automobile business and we lost everything during the Depression [and] had to start all over again.

P. Bruno: Oh my. How did you come to settle in Metuchen?

J. Rolfe: I was married and he lived in Metuchen, so we settled in Metuchen.

P. Bruno: Oh, he was a Metuchen resident?

J. Rolfe: Um-hm. Oh yes.

P. Bruno: So how far does his family go back in Metuchen? A long time?

J. Rolfe: Oh yes, a long time. And they're all gone. There is only one of the Rolfes left and that is Sis [Isabella (Rolfe) Davis] who lives outside of Baltimore. And my daughter [Barbara (Rolfe) Prettyman] sees her quite often.

P. Bruno: What was Main Street like back in the 1900s?

J. Rolfe: Well, there were two grocery stores. [Daniel] LaForge [at 401 Main Street], and he was the kind that gave credit; the other two people didn't, Koops & Abels [at 429 Main Street] were what I would say the beginning of a bigger market (supermarket). And those were the only two stores. And we had Sammy Schwartz [Samuel Schwartz at 426 Main Street], the butcher. He was the only one in town that sold meat. [chuckles] So that was the extent, and—

P. Bruno: He must have had a good business if everyone went there for their meat.

J. Rolfe: Well, the men still commuted, and they may have gotten it. I don't know. But anyway, my husband's experience with him was—Jack's mother [Eleanor Rolfe] was raised on a farm and she knew all about food; she knew about meat. And they went down there one Saturday afternoon and [coughs] Jack said, "I would like a beef roast." And his mother said, "Well, I would too." And Schwartz said to her, "Well, I couldn't sell it to you. But I could sell it to you, to Jack." And he said, "Oh no, you'll never sell me another cent's worth of meat." From then on, he got meat in Elizabeth.

¹ Ms. Rolfe may be referring to the Wright-Martin Aircraft Corporation that was formed in 1916 by a merger between the Wright Company and the Glen L. Martin Aircraft Company. The company was reorganized as the Wright Aeronautical Corporation in 1919 and the Curtiss-Wright Corporation in 1929.

P. Bruno: And what about shopping in Metuchen?

J. Rolfe: Well, there was Kramer's Department Store [at 441 Main Street], but they wouldn't have clothes like you or I have on; they just had materials by the yard, and notions, and a small amount of furniture. But Mr. [Edward] Kramer was a wonderful man and we missed it very much when that store closed down. [clock ringing in background]

P. Bruno: Did you do any sewing?

J. Rolfe: Yes, but not too much because I had been in business, you see. I was a law secretary for seven years. And I once worked for former Governor [Foster McGowan] Voorhees.² That's way, way [back].

P. Bruno: Oh, tell me about that! When was that?

J. Rolfe: Well now, let me think, that was before I was married.

P. Bruno: Yeah, around 1908, 1910?

J. Rolfe: No, 1910 I graduated from Vail-Deane. Then I was home about a year before I went to business school. And my sister [Lucille D. Ley] and I went and, in those days, people didn't watch education like they did.

P. Bruno: And not many women went on for higher education in those days either.

J. Rolfe: No, that's right. And after a couple of months, Mr. Barryman [phonetic]—who we knew, was a neighbor of ours—said, "I'm going to give you and Lucille a test because there's no use in you using the time on spelling." And we passed it 100 percent. And he said, "That was really something because the rest of the class didn't know how to spell." [laughter] Isn't that funny? And that was that long ago. He suggested that I go and see Governor Voorhees because he had a secretary that he had many years—something like twenty years or something like [that]—and she was ill and wanted to have a leave of absence. So I guess I was there with him, oh, six or eight months and that's how I met Judge Whittemore.

P. Bruno: And that's how you got your job in Elizabeth? So did you work in Trenton?

J. Rolfe: No, I didn't work in Trenton. He, Governor Voorhees, had an office in Elizabeth, right off North Broad Street. He and Judge Whittemore, who ended up being president of the Union County Trust Company—which is a very large bank—they had offices near together and they used to have lunch together and all that. All the lawyers get together; they're all alike.

P. Bruno: They still do today.

J. Rolfe: [laughs] Yeah, I know they do.

² Foster McGowan Voorhees (1856-1927) was a Republican who served as the thirtieth governor of New Jersey from 1899 to 1902. He also represented Union County in the New Jersey Senate from 1895 to 1898.

P. Bruno: What were some of the pressing issues of the state at the time that you worked for Governor Voorhees? Can you remember?

J. Rolfe: No, I can't remember. There wasn't any pressing thing like we have now where the politicians are hooked up. And I think if we get rid of some of them out of Washington [DC; District of Columbia], things would be a little bit better.

P. Bruno: So you were his private secretary?

J. Rolfe: Yes, I took the gal's job, took everything over. And that was a good experience for me. And then he got me the job with Judge Whittemore.

P. Bruno: And you were a legal secretary?

J. Rolfe: Yeah, um-hm.

P. Bruno: What were some of the cases—any cases stick out in your mind?

J. Rolfe: Oh no, because that's so long ago. Now Governor Voorhees was very neat about his office. Judge Whittemore was just the opposite. He'd let papers pile up and if I touched one of them, he'd know it.

P. Bruno: Did you have difficulty adjusting to the two different styles?

J. Rolfe: [laughs] Yes, sure I did because I'm neat myself and I like to keep everything neat. And I don't know how he could find anything because in his back office, he had all his papers piled up. But he seemed to know what he was doing so I just let that go by because I tried to straighten that up a couple of times and he bawled me out, so I didn't do anything about it. [chuckling]

P. Bruno: Oh wow. How about social life in Metuchen? What was that like?

J. Rolfe: Oh, well, we had the Metuchen Club then, which is now the Masonic Lodge [Mount Zion Lodge No. 135] on [483] Middlesex Avenue. Well, I'll tell you who my friends—you've heard of the Danas here?

P. Bruno: Yes, I'm planning to interview Mrs. Dana.

J. Rolfe: Oh, are you? Well, she was one of my best friends. And the McKenzies lived up the street [at 43 Graham Avenue]. And Helen Ruedger wasn't even around here then; they built their house later. But Dr. [William] McKenzie and his family, the elder Dr. McKenzie wasn't living when I moved here, he had died shortly before that, but that was a wonderful family. And Mrs. Letson, who was Adele MacKenzie, was the last one to leave. And Dr. Bob McKenzie [Robert McKenzie] is retired now, and he was a wonderful doctor.

P. Bruno: Is he still living in Metuchen?

J. Rolfe: No, no, he lives somewhere down at the shore. One of his sons built a house so he put an L-shape on it so that he could be near his. But he has a wonderful family. The McKenzies were outstanding people. Plus the Ayers lived in this house over here on the corner [at 59 Graham Avenue].

P. Bruno: On Graham Avenue.

J. Rolfe: And then Mrs. [Emily] Daisy [(Ayers)] Letson's husband [Charles Townsend Letson] died so she moved here and took it over. Well, this street was just like one big family.

P. Bruno: That's great.

J. Rolfe: Oh, it was wonderful. And the Harrises lived up the other side of the street [at 36 Graham Avenue] and Parkers [at 20 Graham Avenue]. And of course, the Harrises are both dead; the Parkers are in Florida. I got a letter from Eddie [Edward Parker]; I sent him a Christmas card. And I have trunks up in my attic that belong to him and he was only going to keep them there for three months. It's been fifteen years! [laughs] So he wanted to write and tell me that I could sell them. Oh, a great big wardrobe trunk. Now where would I get in touch with anybody? Would a firm that makes trucks, I mean trunks, would they be interested in anything that's in wonderful shape, second hand?

P. Bruno: Is it an antique?

J. Rolfe: No, but it's a huge wardrobe trunk. I bet he paid a hundred dollars for it when it was new, and that was nothing to what you would pay now.

P. Bruno: And he wants to sell it?

J. Rolfe: I want to sell it. He wants me to get rid of it, um-hm. Because he drives—his wife [Anne Parker] is in a nursing home; she's had a stroke.

P. Bruno: If it's old, you may try antique dealers.

J. Rolfe: Oh, I've tried them and, well, one of them came and they said, "I'll give you thirty dollars for that picture." I said, "Oh no, you won't because you would sell it for a hundred dollars." That's done on tin.

P. Bruno: And is it an oil painting? On tin?

J. Rolfe: It's an oil painting and it's done on tin, um-hm. [SLIDE 3] And my daughter is head of the—what do you call it?—thrift shop, which of course the thrift shops are run by Jews all over. Well, this is the council's thrift shop. And it's the first time they've had a person that was trained in—don't mind me, that's my brain.

P. Bruno: I think you told me merchandising?

J. Rolfe: Yes. And they are just lucky to have her because when she had her baby, she stayed home for a year or two. And Jim [James Prettyman, daughter's husband] said, "For heaven's sake, get a job. You're ill at ease, you're not satisfied." So they got a very good maid. But then she had to come to New York, and she would come and stay here. But she had to leave on the eight o'clock train in the morning; she'd get out at eight at night. That's a rough job. And this job like—a lot of these young girls have modern furniture. They want to dispose of the whole thing. And she'll go and give an estimate on everything in the house. And then

they bring that to the shop and then whatever her estimate is, whatever the price they get for the stuff, they can take it off their income tax.

P. Bruno: Let's get back to the painting. Do you know who did it?

J. Rolfe: No I don't. That came from my family.

P. Bruno: It was handed down through your family?

J. Rolfe: Yeah, oh, a lot of these things were.

P. Bruno: Do you know the area? What it's of?

J. Rolfe: No, I don't. I don't know a thing about it. But my sister sold about six pictures that size. I'm the last one of the family. When I'm gone, Barbara won't have anybody on my side of the family. Isn't that awful?

P. Bruno: It is.

J. Rolfe: Out of a big family of six children and a mother and father. And, well, Barbie didn't know a thing about antiques when she took this job. Now all the clothes that I get, come from that shop. Would you ever think this was a hand-me-down from somebody?

P. Bruno: No. It's beautiful!

J. Rolfe: Well, and everything is in good taste and she won't take anything unless it's dry cleaned or if it's washable. It has to be washed and ironed. And, oh, they are doing a huge business. So she and Jim bought these two books on antiques and studied them, and now she's in with all the antique dealers in Baltimore. [chuckles] So she's a go-getter.

P. Bruno: Yeah. This is your daughter?

J. Rolfe: Um-hm.

P. Bruno: Let's get back to social life in Metuchen. Now it revolved around the Metuchen Center [Metuchen Club] and what sort of activities did they have?

J. Rolfe: At the club? Well, they had bowling and now like the men would all go down there Saturday night and that was when [Gregory] Costa first opened an ice cream store [at 416 Main Street]. Nobody drank liquor then. I never had a cocktail glass in the house till I'd been married about eight years. And it makes a difference. Then when the golf club [Metuchen Golf and Country Club] was built, then a lot of the people joined the golf club. Jack and his family belonged to the Metuchen Club and when it was sold, we each got money out of it because we had bought stock in it. And when they sold it, and that came in very handy because it was during the Depression that this happened.

P. Bruno: Now Jack was your husband?

J. Rolfe: Um-hm.

P. Bruno: Well, what was the mood of the country like during the Depression?

J. Rolfe: There was nothing like it is now. You never heard—when I first moved here, they had a jail which held four men. They never had anybody in there. They only had two policemen: the police chief and one helper.

P. Bruno: This was in 1917.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, and all on to—well, it was quite a while. But now murder is the first thought anybody has now. It's just terrible. But a lot of the activity centered around the people that I met there at the club, like Evelyn Thompson, and Helen Dana, and Madge Seiler [Madelyn Seiler], and oh, I can't think—so many of them. I didn't know Helen Ruegger until later. She had lived here first and then I think she and her mother moved to Perth Amboy. But I never knew her real intimately until she built the house over here [at 60 Graham Avenue].

P. Bruno: Well, her name was given to us because of her relatives being Edgars, which is family that goes way back in Metuchen.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, yeah, and the Edgars lived right up here on [31] Graham Avenue.

P. Bruno: Oh, did they?

J. Rolfe: Oh yes, on the other side of the street. Well, this was just like one big family. And if anybody had illness in the family or they died, everybody flocked there to do housework if they could or take them food or something. And it is so different now that, my dear, I don't even know who lives on Graham Avenue. And did you ever hear of the Docs? They bought this house over here. He's in real estate [The Docs Agency on Main Street].

P. Bruno: No, I think Mrs. [Ruth] Terwilliger might know him.

J. Rolfe: Yeah. Well, she [Rosalind (Brockett) Docs] reminded me somewhat of the attitude that used to be. She had a party on the sixteenth of December, and I told her I'd have to let her know. Well, I can't go to a cocktail party and stand up. I just can't do it; I'm exhausted. So I called her and told her I'd have to renege, but that I would see her. So she came over a couple hours later and brought me a box of cookies. Now wasn't that nice?

P. Bruno: Oh, it was.

J. Rolfe: Um-hm, and she's very attractive. She owns that nursery school [ABZ Nursery] down on [24] Hillside Avenue.

P. Bruno: I think I've seen it.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, well, and her husband is in the real estate business. I haven't met him at all, but she's very charming. And she brought her little six-year-old girl. And I told her then that I had known the Ayers, and the Letsons, and the McKenzies, and all those people. I used to know everybody on Graham Avenue. Now the gal that's a retired schoolteacher, what in the heck is her name? She lives up on the

corner of High [Street] and Graham Avenue. Well, she was one of the original ones.

P. Bruno: You can't remember her name, her family name?

J. Rolfe: No. She goes way back because her grandmother lived with her and so did her mother. And she's the last one out of the family and she rents part of her house [at 2 Graham Avenue]. Oxenford, Elano Oxenford.

P. Bruno: That's a name; that's a new name. We haven't come across that before.

J. Rolfe: Oh, haven't you?

P. Bruno: And that's a family that goes way back?

J. Rolfe: Yes, because they lived here when I moved here. And her mother and her grandmother were living then and she was a schoolteacher. She's now retired.

P. Bruno: Well, let's get back to the—I think we're up to the Depression days. How did it affect your family?

J. Rolfe: It just cleaned us out. [laughs] Absolutely.

P. Bruno: Now, your husband was in a business?

J. Rolfe: Yes, he was in the automobile business and had his showroom. And he kept it going as long as he could, and he decided he just had to give it up. Then these friends of ours, the Neil Potter, asked if they couldn't come and live here. Well, we had them, I should say, one winter. That helped out on the food. And they had a youngster, Fred. But they were the last ones I ever had, and if they hadn't been friends, I wouldn't have done it. But there was no feeling about the Depression. Everybody felt sorry for everybody else because they were cleaned right out!

P. Bruno: Everybody?

J. Rolfe: Yeah, it was just terrific. And there was never any thought of anybody being murdered or raped or anything. That never entered—and I was saying to Mary, this colored gal that comes and works for me, I said it was so different because the attitude, you felt sorry for everybody and you wanted to help everybody that you could. But there was no thought of any murders or fires, and they are a very prominent thing now. [chuckles] So the attitude was very different. So my husband got back into something that—automobile parts and so forth. He'd always been interested in cars and at one time he was making \$20,000 a year, which was very good.

P. Bruno: Oh, this was after the Depression?

J. Rolfe: No, this is before the Depression.

P. Bruno: Before the Depression, wow!

J. Rolfe: Yes. In 1928, he was really doing well and then in [19]29, it just went crash like that. Well, he got into—oh, I can't think of it—well, where they make parts for automobiles. And he was just commencing to get back into the thing when he had this heart attack and died in [19]46. And I've taken over ever since.

P. Bruno: But after the Depression and he lost his business, did he go into another business?

J. Rolfe: Oh yes, but it was related to automobiles. It was parts or something. I tried to forget all that. [laughs]

P. Bruno: And after he died, you took over the business?

J. Rolfe: No, I didn't take over any business. I just started right in and [clears throat] rearranged the furniture; sold my dining room furniture. And believe it or not, we'd had it twenty-five years and I sold it within \$200 of what I had paid for it.

P. Bruno: Great.

J. Rolfe: And it kept me busy getting those rooms ready because I wanted it. And I should have kept a lot of the roomers that I had because some of them—oh, the ones I had from the Bethlehem Steel [Company], they were all college boys, four of them. And they had the three rooms and the room on the third floor, which we never thought a thing about. If they were my sons, they couldn't have been nicer. But of course, they were educated. The crowd now that I have are just working men without any college education, but those boys—and I heard from every one of them at Christmas, a long letter.

P. Bruno: That's great. So what changes, besides the closeness that doesn't exist anymore between the neighbors, have you seen in Metuchen?

J. Rolfe: Well, I'm very close to Mrs. Ruegger and to the Rileys and to the Levecks [phonetic]. But outside of that, I don't know anybody on the street!

P. Bruno: And how about the town? Changes in the town?

J. Rolfe: Oh, well, because you see, I gave up—you wouldn't believe I was vice president of the [Metuchen] Women's Club. I was vice president of the Garden Club and I was a great worker in the [First] Presbyterian Church. Well, I had to give all that up because I was running my house and cleaning it then and everything when I was [clears throat]—so after the Arsenal closed, my daughter said, "Mother, why don't you get a job babysitting. You could advertise." Well, I didn't advertise, but I spoke to several people and I did that for ten years. And I hear from so many of those people that say that they never—like I would take charge of the house while they would go to Bermuda or they'd go to California or somewhere where they were gone a whole week. And I said to Barbie at the time, "I haven't taken care of a baby since I took care of you." She says, "Oh Mother, forget it." So well, all those people I hear from now, now Mrs. Galkin, who her husband is a wonderful dentist, called me yesterday and she's just gotten back from Florida and I was with them for the matter of three years with two children.

P. Bruno: And when was this?

J. Rolfe: Well, I've been out of the babysitting business about two years. It was before that; it wasn't too long ago.

P. Bruno: So you've been keeping busy.

J. Rolfe: Yes, um-hm. And believe it or not, I used to make fifty, sixty dollars a week babysitting.

P. Bruno: That's great money.

J. Rolfe: Well, you see I took care of the whole house. They would do the marketing, but I mean I'd go in and take over. And after all, if it's in the winter, there's a heater to take care of and the responsibility of the whole house. [laughs] Michael Galkin was a little devil; he was about two years old and she often laughs about it. And he goes to Pingry School now in Elizabeth. They had left; they were going to go down to Florida for a week. I locked both doors and I knew he couldn't get out. And all at once, I couldn't find him. I was petrified. And I had never been to the house before and they lived in an upstairs apartment. Well, I looked, and he was under the dresser on the floor, lying flat, giggling.

P. Bruno: He was hiding on you.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, he was hiding. And his mother told him about that when they were here, oh, I don't know, six months ago. And now he's in Pingry and his sister is in—I said, "Why didn't you send them to Vail-Deane?" They sent them to private school. And Mrs. Galkin pilots the plane herself; they have a plane. So they're doing all right and I always hear from her. She had a long talk with me over the phone yesterday.

P. Bruno: That's great. I think I'm going to turn the tape over.

J. Rolfe: Yeah. [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Bruno: Okay, if you can, why don't we talk about Governor [George] Silzer³ and the Silzers for a while?

J. Rolfe: Well, I didn't know him so well. I knew her [wife, Henrietta Thomas (Waite) Silzer] afterwards. And you know why? Because my husband and I went over. Governor Silzer died, and he was a prominent man, a very fine person. He used to come over and see Barbie when she was in her carriage. And he died in Newark and nobody—fell on the street and nobody knew who he was⁴. So Jack and I went over to see him and ever since that—she was a little bit on the uppy side in the beginning, but we became very friendly and we went out to dinner at

³ George Sebastian Silzer (1870-1940) was a Democrat who served as the thirty-eighth governor of New Jersey from 1923 to 1926. He also represented Middlesex County in the New Jersey Senate from 1907 to 1912.

⁴ Governor Silzer died on October 16, 1940 of a heart attack as he was traveling to the Newark Pennsylvania Station from his law offices in Newark.

least one night a week. [coughs] And when Barbie had to come to New York a couple of times a month, she'd always come on the B&O [Baltimore and Ohio Railroad] in Plainfield and Mrs. Silzer and I would drive over and get her. And then Mrs. Silzer said, "Barbara, I'll let you drive my car and that's more now that I would let my daughter." [laughs] I've never forgotten that. Well, she was a very fine person, and she would call up and I'd go over and sit on that porch, and it was really—but this didn't happen till after he was gone and what impressed her was that we went over to see him, and I took a cake over the next day. And those are the things that hit people, see?

P. Bruno: Yeah. You were a good neighbor to have.

J. Rolfe: Yes, and we were very friendly from then on. And then she had cancer and was in terrible shape.

P. Bruno: Did they do a lot of entertaining when he was governor?

J. Rolfe: No, not particularly. They didn't have a governor's house, did they? They lived there.

P. Bruno: Oh, I didn't know. I was going to ask you that.

J. Rolfe: Yeah. I don't think they had a governor's home like they have now. But Governor Silzer was a very fine person; he did a lot for people. And she lived well, like up in Oak Tree, I think, when she—and they only had one son, Parker. And he was killed in a plane crash, oh, years ago, when the plane came down. All these fathers were trying to get to New York because it was Father's Day or Mother's Day or something, and the plane crashed. And everybody on the plane was killed.

P. Bruno: Oh my. What about your thoughts and feelings about your life in Metuchen?

J. Rolfe: Well, that's just the reason I'm staying here because I like it. My daughter would like me to come to Baltimore. Now why should I give up this house [at 68 Graham Avenue] when I worked so hard to keep it in trim? [SLIDES 4 and 5]

P. Bruno: It's beautiful.

J. Rolfe: And of course, it needs to be all decorated now, but I'm not going to worry about that. [clock ringing in background] But I painted all the woodwork in the house and all the floors. And somebody came in that had never been in and they said, "Oh, we love those dark floors." Well, they were wide board, and one was painted red and the other was blue. So I got the varnish and did it, and I painted all the furniture upstairs. [SLIDES 6 and 7]

P. Bruno: And you're busy in the summertime with your garden and your flowers.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, but I couldn't do a thing this summer. It just makes me sick when I look at those pictures and think how it used to be. And I took care of all the flowers myself. [SLIDE 8 and 9]

P. Bruno: How many different varieties did you have?

J. Rolfe: Oh, I would have perennials and I would have annuals like zinnias and marigolds and snapdragons and all that, as they came along in the season. Oh, when I was still down at the [Raritan] Arsenal, we'd would come home and work evenings in the garden. You know it would be light until almost eight o'clock.

P. Bruno: And when did you work in the Arsenal?

J. Rolfe: I was there ten years before I went into this babysitting business. And before that—you'll be shocked [laughs]—I was receptionist at the Middlesex Hospital from eight-thirty to five every day. And they paid me all of twenty-five dollars a week.

P. Bruno: Well, that was like doing volunteer work.

J. Rolfe: [laughs] Then I went to the Roosevelt Hospital and it was the same thing. [coughs] So then I heard that they were looking for people for stock control in the Arsenal, so I called them up, made an appointment, and went down to see him. And I remember Mr. Donovan, my boss down there, said, "Gee, they never paid you much on these receptionist jobs, did they?" And I said, "No." All of them twenty-five dollars a week! Now isn't that something? My gosh!

P. Bruno: It's hard to live on that little.

J. Rolfe: Oh, why it was terrible. But of course, I was making \$5,000 a year when I left the Arsenal, because I had had training—legal training, you see—and the stock control, and they loved my handwriting where I wrote all the orders on these big sheets until they came along with the IBM [International Business Machines Corporation] machines. But I've had quite an interesting background.

P. Bruno: I should think so.

J. Rolfe: It's been interesting each one. But when I think of paying those receptionists twenty-five dollars a week—I'll bet they pay them a hundred dollars a week now!

P. Bruno: What did you enjoy doing most as far as your jobs?

J. Rolfe: Well, I don't know. I loved kids; I think it was the babysitting. But what I should have done, after Jack died so suddenly, I should have gone and taken a refresher course in law and gone into some law office and I would have made more money. But when I was babysitting, I would put all my room rents in my bank account every week and I would have money left over from my babysitting for my own food and expenses. And now I don't have that, plus I miss it. And that was the only time that I ever had a word with Michael Galkin. And he laughed when they were here last year. They always come after Christmas and they brought me after-dinner wine. And he laughed, he said, "I had you scared to death." I said, "You certainly did because it was my responsibility."

P. Bruno: I think you've managed quite well alone having to manage so long on your own.

J. Rolfe: Yes, I think so too and I couldn't have done if I hadn't had—and of course, I would baby sit at night when I was down at the Arsenal even. But when I was at

Roosevelt Hospital, I used to come through that—I was on from four in the afternoon to twelve at night—I'd come through that park and think nothing of it at night. Why I wouldn't even go to the park at night now, let alone drive.

P. Bruno: What about Metuchen today? Do you like how it's grown and the fast pace of the town?

J. Rolfe: Oh yes. Yes, and now Morris Stores [at 413 Main Street], they have very nice things. There are a lot of stores that have opened that—and, of course, I'm very attached to Boyt's Drug Store [at 411 Main Street] because they've been—now I wanted something to take across the street for Christmas for Mr. and Mrs. Riley (Mr. and Mrs.). So I talked to Cindy Moss, she's the gal in there. And she did all my shopping for me and sent it up here. [laughs]

P. Bruno: That's something you can only find in a small town.

J. Rolfe: Yeah, that's just right. And of course, I've known her for years. And she was a widow and her husband—she's married to Moss now. He divorced his wife but now they're together and they're very congenial. And he lived down the street here on Spring Street.

P. Bruno: And this is Boyt's Drug Store?

J. Rolfe: Boyt's Drug Store, yeah. So I sent her a slip and I got the sweetest note from her. My daughter is always sending me things. I took a box of slips down out of that closet when Bob moved that stuff out last night for me. Six of them I hadn't even had on. I don't wear a slip much anymore; I wear these petticoats. And another thing since I have this condition where I have to go to bathroom very often. Now isn't it funny, when I'm occupied, like you're here to talk to me, I don't have to go. If I were alone, I have to go every fifteen minutes.

P. Bruno: That is sort of strange. [laughs]

J. Rolfe: Oh, it is. It's funny. And you see, I've never been used to being alone. Oh, when I sold my car and took the money and bought this television, I thought that's my only—

P. Bruno: It's a beautiful TV [television].

J. Rolfe: And the fellow that I got it from specializes in Zeniths. And he's right up the street and I knew him because, well, I read and I watch TV at night. That's my only entertainment because none of my friends go out at night anymore. And fifteen of them are widows! Isn't that terrible?

P. Bruno: Somehow the women always seem to last longer than the men.

J. Rolfe: Well, don't you think it's the strain that they have of being under business? I know that's what killed Jack because he had an enormous heart attack and just went back on the pillow, and that was it. And he had been told to take it easy and he hadn't done it.

P. Bruno: A lot of people are told to take it easy and they don't.

J. Rolfe: Yeah. And then that's what happened, and he was the first one out of his family to go.

P. Bruno: Well, I don't really have any more questions. Do you have anything else that you would want to add about Metuchen and your life here?

J. Rolfe: Well, I was quite active in the Presbyterian Church.

P. Bruno: Oh, do you want to talk about that?

J. Rolfe: Well, no because I had to give all that up. I was in all these different associations.

P. Bruno: Was it the First Presbyterian Church?

J. Rolfe: Yes, it's right across from the station [at 270 Woodbridge Avenue]. And Dr. [Adolph] Behrenberg, the minister, died.

P. Bruno: Yes, I read about it recently in the paper.

J. Rolfe: Oh, he had—he was a very eloquent person. And he had made fifteen trips abroad. And do you know the Theological Seminary at Princeton gets the contents of his whole house? And the antiques are out of this world.

P. Bruno: Really? I didn't know that. Did he leave it in his will that they should get it?

J. Rolfe: Yes, um-hm. And that's where my dividend checks come from, because this cousin of mine was very interested, and he had never married and he left this money to my sister and I. And then when she died, why it all reverted to me. But it's about \$400 a year and it comes in every three months. So it's very nice.

P. Bruno: It is.

J. Rolfe: Um-hm. Then I can plan on doing something that I hadn't planned before.

P. Bruno: Yeah, everybody that I've talked to or read about said that Dr. Behrenberg did a lot of traveling.

J. Rolfe: Oh, he did; he made fifteen trips abroad. And do you know I was in Kennedy Hospital a couple of years ago for a week under—I had to go for observation. He came every day to see me and on the last day that I was there, on the Friday, he brought one of the women from the church and they served communion. Now he would go and see everyone that was sick in Metuchen, whether or not they belonged to the Presbyterian Church. And he was only sixty-two and that's very young.

P. Bruno: Oh, it is.

J. Rolfe: But he's had diabetes for a long time, and I think that that's what resulted in. And he wanted to go, this last summer he wanted to go abroad, and the doctors said no, he couldn't do it. So he ended up in Kennedy Hospital. And they will

miss him because he was there every day. He gave every afternoon to the sick people.

P. Bruno: What were some of his sermons like?

J. Rolfe: Well, you know what my son-in-law said, outside of Norman Vincent Peale, he'd never had seen a minister that could put over a sermon like that. And he tried to get in the Army in the First World War and he couldn't on account of the diabetes. He's had it for years.

P. Bruno: Oh, I didn't know.

J. Rolfe: Um-hm. And that's why he never married.

P. Bruno: Because of the diabetes?

J. Rolfe: Um-hm. And his brother and sister-in-law came on from Ohio. They lived in—and where was it?—Cleveland. They came on and settled down here because he was very bad. The doctor said it was only a matter of time. I think he had cancer of the esophagus.

P. Bruno: Oh, plus the diabetes?

J. Rolfe: [coughs] And it was promoted by the diabetes. He'd had diabetes for years. He was on a very strict diet. And I don't know how he lived as long as he did, going into all those different foreign countries. You can't get the kind of food like you have at home.

P. Bruno: Did he preach his sermons in the foreign countries or were they pleasure trips? Do you know?

J. Rolfe: Well, but he always visited with all the ministers. He made it a business of going and he wanted to go to Israel this time and Dr. King said, "No you're not leaving the country. You're not in any condition to do it." So then he ended up in Kennedy Hospital and then they took him to that nursing home. Where do the nursing homes get away with charging \$150 a week?

P. Bruno: Oh, I don't know.

J. Rolfe: Why isn't that terrible? And a lot of them don't get much care and the food isn't anything to brag about.

P. Bruno: The price for any sort of medical care today is outrageous.

J. Rolfe: Oh, it's terrible, absolutely. I have to pay fifteen dollars to both men that I go to whether they do anything for me or not.

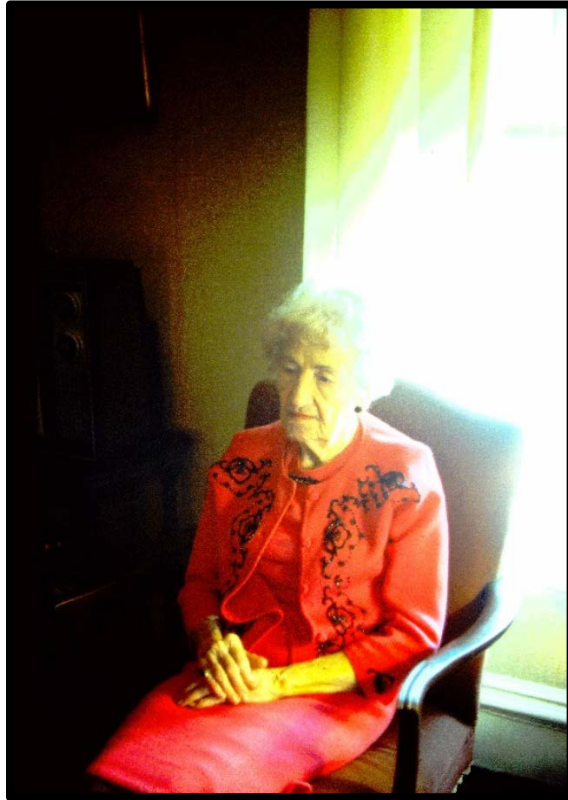
P. Bruno: It's just the going rate.

J. Rolfe: It sure is and it's what they're getting away with. I think doctors and lawyers and politicians are all in a group. [laughs] [recording paused]

P. Bruno: Well, I think we'll end the tape here and I want to thank you, Mrs. Rolfe, for agreeing to do the oral taping with me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

INTERVIEW SLIDES



SLIDE 1: Jeannette Rolfe in the living room of her home at 68 Graham Avenue in Metuchen, 1978.



SLIDE 2: Jeannette Rolfe in the living room of her home at 68 Graham Avenue in Metuchen, 1978.



SLIDE 3: Oil painting on tin owned by Jeannette Rolfe along the interior of 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen, 1978.



SLIDE 4: View of the home of Jeannette Rolfe at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen, ca. 1930s.



SLIDE 5: View of the home of Jeannette Rolfe at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen, ca. 1970s.



SLIDE 6: Stove in the kitchen along the interior of Jeanette Rolfe's house at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen, 1978.



SLIDE 7: Living room along the interior of Jeanette Rolfe's house at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen, 1978.



SLIDE 8: Jeannette Rolfe standing in her flower garden at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen.



SLIDE 9: Jeannette Rolfe standing in her flower garden at 68 Graham Avenue, Metuchen.