

## **Martin Jessen**

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno

Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, May 2005 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, September 2019

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Abstract: Martin D. Jessen Jr. (1926- ), often referred to as “Marty,” was born in Perth Amboy to Hannah (Hughes) Jessen and Martin Jessen. He moved to Metuchen at a week old and lived with his grandparents at 343 Main Street and later at 52 Spring Street. Mr. Jessen graduated from Metuchen High School in 1944 and worked several jobs in town, including working at the Raritan Arsenal. Following graduation, he served in the Navy during World War II and returned to the military as a rescue diver during the Korean War. He graduated from Rutgers University in 1950 with a degree in civil engineering. Mr. Jessen worked in the construction business as president of Arnolt Brothers and as president of Victorian Office Rentals, a company that restores buildings for commercial use. He is married to Barbara Jane Bruner and has two children and several grandchildren.

Mr. Jessen has been an active member of the Metuchen community for almost seventy years. He was a member of the Eagle Scouts, deacon of the Dutch Reformed Church, director of the Metuchen YMCA, member of the Metuchen Planning Board, chairman of the Metuchen Savings and Loan, former chairman of the Metuchen Historical Commission, and board member of the Metuchen Rotary Club and the Metuchen Chamber of Commerce. He also served as chairman of the Metuchen Country Fair, an annual fair along Main Street that began in 1964 as part of the 300th anniversary of New Jersey. He also has written a short stories column in the *Criterion* and an autobiography titled *Marty's Musings*.

In this interview, Mr. Jessen discusses his family's genealogy and his childhood in Metuchen including the various jobs and activities he completed as a young adult. He also touches upon the Depression, his service in the Navy, his recollections of the fires at Franklin School and the Dutch Reformed Church, and his involvement in the Metuchen Country Fair.

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P. Bruno: Today is February 1, 1978 and this is Paula Bruno interviewing Marty Jessen of Metuchen, New Jersey. [recording paused]

Okay, I'd like you to start talking a little bit about your ancestors, and your parents and grandparents, and when your family first came to Metuchen.

**M. Jessen: Well, on my father's side, my grandparents came from Denmark and they came to Perth Amboy in the late 1800s. And my grandfather [Martin Jessen] was a**

carpenter and my grandmother [Mary Jessen] was a housewife, and they lived down on Woodbridge Avenue in Perth Amboy. And my father [Martin Jessen] worked as a mechanic and he served in World War I as a medical sergeant. He was in France for about a year.

On my mother's side, my grandfather [Daniel Hughes] came from Wales [United Kingdom] from that little town near Cardiff. He came to this country when he was seventeen and he became a melter and then finally a superintendent in the steel mills [at C. Pardee Steel Works in Perth Amboy]. My grandmother [Elizabeth (Davis) Hughes] was born in Ohio, and in early life was a schoolteacher and then married my grandfather. And they moved all around the country and they eventually settled in Metuchen in the early 1920s on [343] Main Street and they bought that house. An interesting story is that my grandfather went out to buy the house without my grandmother knowing it. And he looked at several houses in Metuchen and this particular one, all he looked at was the chicken coop. And he liked the chicken coop in the backyard, never went inside the house, and bought the house right then and there. When my grandmother got there, she was furious because there was very little plumbing inside the house and the kitchen had an old cast iron sink in it, which was all rusty, and a pitcher pump for water. The water came out of a cistern. So that was always trouble between my grandmother and grandfather until grandfather finally got the house fixed up.

I was born in Perth Amboy and moved to Metuchen at the tender age of one week and lived on Main Street opposite where the post office [at 360 Main Street] is today. I went to kindergarten and first grade—and first, second, and third grade—in the Washington School, which is now called the Mildred [B.] Moss [Elementary] School. And then we moved over on to [52] Spring Street and I went to the Edgar School. And when I got to the Edgar School, I thought I was in heaven because behind the Edgar School was a big woods called Edgar Woods. And at recess and after school, all of the boys used to run back into the woods and if you walked far enough back into the woods, you came to the town dump which was by what was called in those days the old rubber factory<sup>1</sup>, which was a factory that went broke right after World War I and they made hard rubber items like stoppers for sinks and combs and things like that. By the rubber factory was a town dump, and when I first found that I thought I was going to Valhalla with all of the treasures that people would throw away. And we used to make trips out there to salvage different things and as you walked away from the dump, the heavier things would drop closest to the dump and the lighter things you would eventually carry home. But I loved to play in the woods back there and there was a swamp back behind there, and we boys used to go back and cut punks all the time in the spring, cattails. And we'd hang them up in the attic to dry, and then in the evening in the summertime, we'd light them and have the smoke going around us to keep the mosquitoes away, which were particularly fierce for most of the time.

The town in those days had a population of around 5,000 people. And Main Street was built up just about solid. But when you got away from Main Street, there were a lot of vacant lots and we kids used to have a grand time playing on vacant lots. One would be a baseball field, another would be a football field, and another would be just a junk pile where we would go and have fun. We were forever building huts.

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<sup>1</sup> During World War II, this factory was used as part of the New Jersey Fulgent Company, which manufactured military flares with parachutes.

We liked to build underground huts in the summertime, and in the spring, the underground huts would get flooded so then we'd call them swimming pools. And we would build tree houses and regular huts. And then we always had clubs with rules and by-laws and everything. As I recall it, life was very pleasant although most of the town was poor. And we were poor and frankly I didn't even realize that we were poor. I knew I had holes in my socks and I only had one pair of shoes, but I figured everybody only had one pair of shoes, so it never bothered me too much.

We used to have great fun with the railroads, there being three railroads in town. And in the early thirties, the Pennsylvania [Railroad] was electrified, but still there was a lot of steam engines went by. And it was great fun to go down by the station and watch the steam engines go by with their big drivers pounding and the steam hissing out of the cylinders and the big puffing and huffing of the stacks. And on the Lehigh Valley Railroad at Main Street and at Graham Avenue, you could stand on the bridge and the train would go right underneath you and you could look right down the smokestack, but then you had to duck because the cinders would be coming up in your eye. And people talk about air pollution now—in those days you had a terrible time with all the soot in the air because some of the railroads burned hard coal, but most of them burned soft coal. And in everybody's house, all the windowsills would have coal dust laying on them and no matter how hard the housewives tried and how often they cleaned, why it would just come right back. As soon as the wind blew again, you'd have coal dust all over everything. And your white shirts would get dirty right away, and that was before the time of automatic washing machines.

And the washing of the clothes was a big deal. We had a Thor washer<sup>2</sup>, which had a big tumbler on it, and I remember wash day used to be an all-day project. In the morning, my mother would go down and start up the washing machine, and we would have big boilers on the stove, and we'd get boiling water and then the particularly hard things that were to get cleaned, they would go into the boiler and be boiled with different concoctions. The other stuff would go into the washing machine, and you'd wring them out and put them in a hump and then when you got all done, you'd put the rinse water in the washing machine and then you had to wash them again in the rinse water and you have to do that a couple of times. And the wringer wouldn't take the water out of the washer the way a spin dryer does; it'd be quite heavy. And it was our job lugging the clothesbasket out, and then you hung them to dry on a line. And once a year, the clothesline always broke and dropped the clothes down into the mud. It usually happened in the spring when there was mud on the ground. And then you'd have to pick the clothes up and take them back in and wash them again. In the wintertime, they used to freeze solid and it used to be quite a time in the evening when you'd go to bring the wash in. To get the blankets in, you had to break them in the middle to bend them around the corner to get them in. [laughter] And then we had a coal stove in the kitchen and we had a hot air furnace, a pipeless furnace, for the rest of the house, and you'd hang them over there on hangers to get the rest of the moisture out of them. But it was quite a project. Then the next day would be spent ironing and sorting and putting them away. It was a lot of work, a lot of work, compared to what it is today with an automatic washer.

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<sup>2</sup> The Thor washing machine was the first electric washing machine sold commercially in the United States.

Our house, as I say, was heated with coal stoves (coal fired). You had to shovel coal all the time. And in the evening, you'd go down and you'd bank the fires and load them up with coal. And the idea was to set the dampers and the drafts in such a way that by seven o'clock in the morning, it would just start to be burning red so it would kind of warm the house up. But I remember always being cold in the wintertime. We'd go to bed in the bedroom, I had a goldfish bowl one time with a frog in it and I remember getting ice on that many times in the morning when I'd wake up. And you'd huddle under the covers, and there would be maybe two or three quilts piled on top of you. But of course, everything leaked in the house—the windows leaked and the walls leaked and everything like that. The wind would blow right through. And you'd have your clothes in a pile at the bottom of the bed and then you'd leap out of bed and grab your clothes and run downstairs and get on top of the register. So that was the only warm place to be, you'd get dressed there. And in the kitchen, we had the coal stove and we were doing most of our cooking on that. And in the summertime, we'd have a wood fire and it was a wonderful garbage disposal because all the papers, newspapers, and garbage, and everything would go in the stove and we turned it into heat. In the summertime, the garbage would go out into the garden and it would be buried in the garden all the time. And you'd never think of throwing all those good nutrients away; you'd always want to return them to the soil where you were taking the vegetables from.

In town, in the summertime, they always had a softball league (a men's softball league). And as a young boy, I remember we always used to gather around the sidelines and cheer the winning team or the losing team, and it was one of the big forms of recreation.

P. Bruno: Were there two softball teams?

M. Jessen: Oh, there was about—there was probably a couple of dozen softball teams altogether.

P. Bruno: But Metuchen had one?

M. Jessen: No, they were all Metuchen teams. But the firemen had a team, the cops, the Craftsmen's Club had a team, the Trojans Club had a team, a couple of the churches had teams, and there were just team-teams too.

P. Bruno: Oh.

M. Jessen: They had a formal league organized and they would play like seven innings in the evening, and sometimes it would get kind of dark before the game was over. It was all softball.

And then we had the local YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association at 65 High Street] to go to and we'd go swimming up there, and I guess all of us learned to swim there. And in the summertime, they had a Bible school. And I used to look forward to that because if you learned the most verses in Bible school, you got a free membership to the Y. And that was the only way I could get to the Y, if I could win that prize of the Y membership every year. So for about four years running, I made it a point to be up there first so I got first in line, so I had the best chance of winning the prize.

When I was about fifteen, I joined the Boy Scouts, Troop 14, which was sponsored by the American Legion and we met in the Legion Hall [along Lake Avenue]. And I've been associated with Boy Scouts since then. And in those days, it was entirely different than it is today; the parents never came around, never bothered us, the only adult we had there was the Scoutmaster.

P. Bruno: Who was the Scoutmaster in Metuchen?

M. Jessen: Well, I got into the troop right after Jimmy Johnson [James Johnson] left and a guy named Dean Yingling was the Scoutmaster—a very, very talented person. And the committee or the American Legion had a troop committee, and they would come down once a year and bawl us out for breaking a window or some other mischief that we had done because we were a pretty rowdy lot. And we had our meetings on Wednesday night, and we had a wonderful time with very little adult supervision at all. So we had the Scoutmaster there and that was about all, and he taught us to want everything ourselves. And looking back at it, I see that he was a very fine leader because he developed a lot of leadership in the kids that were in the troop. And I see a lot of them in town today that are leaders today.

P. Bruno: Who can you remember that's still in town from the scouts?

M. Jessen: Well, Richie Lake [Ricard Lake], he was my patrol leader and he's assistant postmaster over here. The two Hansen boys—they've left town, but Jimmy Johnson is still in town. Ralph [unclear] is running the travel agency down [unclear]. Goodwin Peck is a brigadier major general in the Air Force now. A lot of us—Joe Ferenczi [Richard Joseph Ferenczi], he's a head honcho lawyer out here in Edison. So a lot of us have hung around the area and it was very good training.

Our family house I said was on [343] Main Street, and I lived there most of my life with my grandmother and grandfather as well as my mother and father. And my mother [Hannah (Hughes) Jessen] was a schoolteacher. During the Depression, she was called a bedside teacher—she went to the children who couldn't come to school—and she got a dollar a day per child, and the most she could handle was five kids. And many a time, she had the children set up so that she would have to walk between eight and ten miles a day in order to cover all the people she did. But we thought it was lucky that she had a job and her job put the bread and butter on the table many, many a time. My father was a mechanic and later a machinist [at Booth Machine in Lakewood] and a tool and die maker. And I can remember he and my mother talking and they'd have the payroll checks home, and they'd have three or four checks and they couldn't cash them because there was no money in the bank at the company he worked for. And it was touch and go all the time. But as I say, as a kid I didn't know any of these things. I thought everything was the land of milk and honey here. In fact, I never realized we were poor until one afternoon I was at home with my grandmother and grandfather and a tramp came to the back door. And we had—a lot of tramps used to go through town. And this particular guy said he hadn't eaten in two days and could he have something to eat. And my grandmother said, "You're welcome to share our meal." And he came into the kitchen and we were eating bread and cheese—we called it roasted cheese on bread—and he looked at it and he said to my grandmother, "I'm sorry ma'am, I'm not that hungry," and he turned around and left. And that got me to thinking, maybe things weren't so great.

P. Bruno: How did you like school?

**M. Jessen:** Well, in grade school, I didn't know what was going on most of the time. I had a terrible time with spelling and I couldn't read. And in second grade, I got very sick. I was out of school for four or five weeks, and during that time my grandmother taught me to read. And it was a funny thing, she taught me to read in a matter of a few hours and it was like somebody opened up the door and suddenly there were all these books to read! And I just couldn't get enough to read. We used to get the *Saturday Evening Post* all the time, and in those days, it had serials that were continued from week to week. And I'd wait for the mailman to deliver on the day it came because I wanted to see what was going to happen next on the serial [unclear].

I went to the Franklin School in seventh grade and I was just an average student. I didn't particularly shine. I played the violin in the high school orchestra and I guess I'm the only guy that played the violin there for six years and I was second violin the whole time. I never got promoted. When they played the *Blue Danube*, all I'd play is ump-ump-ump, ump-ump-ump, ump-ump-ump.

We had good teachers in school, looking back at it. Discipline was very strict. The principal was Elmo Spoerl, and I've met him since then in the [Metuchen] Rotary Club and found out to be a very glorious fellow. But in school, we kids were all deathly afraid of him. And he had a way of scowling at you and looking over his glasses, and you'd just tremble. And the discipline was very strict, and I think because of that we learned a lot more. I remember in our gym class, we had a teacher there named Phil Seitzer [Phillip Seitzer] and I wasn't ever much of an athlete, yet he seemed to teach everybody a little bit about athletics. And gym classes are normally noisy and disorganized and everything, but he blew the whistle, everybody stopped no matter where they were or what they were doing, got into line right away. And he had very good discipline and the way he enforced it is about once a year he'd deck somebody. Some kid would sass him a little bit and man, he'd sock him and knock him right down. And I can't remember any mother coming down and complaining about it. The fact is, when I went to school, if your parents came to the school building, you were in bad trouble. And invariably the parents and the teacher were against the child instead of today, the parents are sticking up for their children all the time, which I think is the worst thing in the world for the child. That's another story though.

We had a garden all the time in the backyard. And we always grew our own vegetables, particularly tomatoes and radishes and turnips, beets, carrots, beans—lots of beans—and we used to can them for the wintertime. And we used to make grape jellies and jams.

**P. Bruno:** Did you have chickens too?

**M. Jessen:** Well, before I came—before I was born—they had chickens. And to this day, my mother won't eat chicken. She had enough of it. In the early thirties, oh, I'd say 10 or 15 percent of the houses in town all had their own chickens because it was semi-farm [unclear]. I remember there was wreck on the Pennsylvania Railroad up at Menlo Park, and it was a freight train that was loaded with cattle cars and chicken cars and there was a whole lot of chickens got away from the wreck and a whole lot of pigs. And for a couple days, you'd see guys walking down the street with a pig under their arm—it was going to be their Sunday dinner.

We had bees in our backyard and my grandfather [Daniel Hughes] and I raised bees together. And we had at one time, we had thirty-six hives and that got to be a problem because sometimes the neighbors don't take too kindly when you have bees. And not because of getting stung—that wasn't the problem—the problem was that the women would hang their clean sheets out on the lawn in the springtime and the bees would fly out and they'd go to clean themselves, and they'd land on the sheets and they'd be wiping their bodies off with their hind legs and they'd leave brown spots all over the sheets. And a lot of ladies used to call up and raise Cain with grandfather over that. And a lot of them used to see the spots and never knew what they were, and we never told them. [laughter]

One afternoon we got a call from a woman down on Maple Avenue, and she had a swarm of bees in her backyard and she wanted to know whether they were ours and whether we could take them away. So grandfather and I walked down—I was just a little kid at the time—and he looked at it. It was on a low hanging branch, so he got a saw and he sawed the branch off and he put the branch over his shoulder with the bees (swarm of bees) hanging down on it and we walked up Main Street. And as we came up Main Street, we cleared the whole street off. Everybody ran into the stores and there wasn't a soul there but us and we walked all the way down Main Street with a swarm of bees and brought it home, put it in the hive. That was always interesting. They say bees keep you young, and my grandfather was in his seventies and I was going to Rutgers. And he met me at the door as I came back from a train one afternoon, and he said, "We've got a problem." That meant I had a problem. And I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Well, there's a swarm up in the tree and I can't get it down and it's spread all over the place." So I went and changed my clothes and went out in the backyard and here was a swarm about twenty feet up in the air. So I got dressed up with the veil and the gloves and everything, got a ladder up there, and I got up. And when I got there, I saw there was a limb that had been sawed off. And I looked up higher about forty feet off the ground, and here's where it would have been sawed from. Here's my grandfather—seventy-eight, seventy-nine—and I said, "Who sawed that limb off up there?" He said, "I did! I went up and sawed it off and I was climbing down, I dropped the damned swarm." He said, "That's the problem!" So I got the swarm into a hive. But he was very agile, and people said the reason was getting stung all the time from the bees keeps you from getting rheumatism. And he never had rheumatism.

When I was about fourteen, I got a job working in the bowling alley down in back of the Masonic Temple [Mount Zion Lodge No. 135]. The Craftsmen's Club had a bowling alley there and we got seventy-five cents a night for setting pins. And I couldn't wait until my hands got big enough so that I could set two alleys at a time because then you could earn a dollar and a half. And I would set the pins from seven at night until about eleven, and then we had to clean the alley up and everything. And I'd start home with my dollar and a half, and I'd stop at Danford's Store down on the corner of Main [Street] and Middlesex [Avenue]. And old man [William C.] Danford would be in there, and he had a soda fountain and I'd go in and have two or three chocolate sodas, which were ten cents apiece—that was a lot of money. And then I'd finish my sodas, and I'd start up the street and I'd get about a block or so, and a police car would pull up alongside of me, the door would open and the policeman would lean over and say, "Get in Marty." And I'd get in and they'd drive me home.

So after that, I worked in Levine's Store [at 400 Main Street], which is now Metuchen Center. And I worked there for I guess about five or six months after schools every day during the week and half a day Saturday and half a day Sunday. And for that, I got the princely sum of \$4.50 a week.

P. Bruno: What kind of store was Levine's?

M. Jessen: Well, Levine's was a newspaper store and he had just gotten rid of the bookie joint—he'd had had a bookie joint in the back of it and that had moved over on to Pearl Street. But he sold newspapers, and cigars, cigarettes, and like that and eventually he got a liquor license and he sold liquor also. And one of my jobs was to come in in the morning, and they had a small back room that would be covered all over the floor with beer bottles, which were a deposit. They had a deposit on them, and I'd have to put these beer bottles up there in cases and stack them up. And when I smell stale beer to this day, I think of straining and grunting to get that last case up on the top of the pile.

The war had started then—World War II—and I eventually got a job out at the Raritan Arsenal. And I got fifty-six cents an hour for working out there, which I thought was fantastic.

P. Bruno: What did you do?

M. Jessen: Well, I worked in a warehouse—I did a lot of things. I started out as just a laborer, but I ended up working in the warehouse in the Shipping Department. And I had a very intelligent boss out there who used to take us young kids and instead of telling us to do a job, he'd divide us up into two teams. And he would have one team racing the other team, and the government got their money's worth from us, but we worked like crazy. I had a wonderful time doing it besides.

I worked out there in my junior year in high school and my senior year in high school. I'd get out of school at three o'clock, and then go home, change my clothes, and catch a bus and start work there at four. And then I would work until ten o'clock at night, and then I could work all day Saturday and all day Sunday. And I could work fifty-sixty hours a week until the labor law caught up with me, and they found out I was a juvenile and then I got cut down to forty hours a week. But I earned good money out there—fifty-six cents an hour—and I thought it was great.

Before I graduated from high school, I joined the Navy. And after my graduation, about a week after my graduation, I was called active duty and I went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station [in Illinois] for my boot training. And I eventually ended up on a destroyer escort in the South Pacific where I was a quartermaster, spending most of my time on the bridge. The Navy did a lot for me; I was a young squirt, looked much younger than I was, very wet behind the ears, and they started to make a man out of me. It was a relatively exciting life, yet it was disciplined and sheltered and there was always somebody to look out for you.

P. Bruno: How were you taken into the Navy?

M. Jessen: Well, I went to join the Navy and I had to go into New York City. And I went there and I was seventeen and I looked like I was thirteen or fourteen. And I went walking in the door of the Navy Recruiting Office and there was a big Marine sergeant there



and his hand shot out and he grabbed me by the shoulder, and he dragged me back and said, "Where are you going, kid?" And I said, "I'm going to join the Navy." And he said, "You're not big enough to join the Navy." And I had my birth certificate with me, so I took the birth certificate out and showed him and he studied it and he said, "All right, you can go in." So I went in and I started to sign up and they said, "All right, we want you to come back in a week." So I went home and I came back in a week. What I didn't know is that they wanted to check with Trenton to make sure my birth certificate was right because they didn't think it was proper.

And I had to go take a physical, and we went to Grand Central Palace and there was a huge convention center like with a big huge floor that was divided up for giving physicals. And there was—almost thousands of men went through at the same time, and I was being examined at the same time they were drafting fathers that were thirty-five, forty years old. And all the men that were with me, they were trying to get out and everybody that would examine them—you'd go to one doctor, he'd be looking at nothing but ears, another doctor would be looking at just the eyes, another doctor would be looking at the nose. And each of these doctors, these guys would be giving the story about their wife and their three kids and so forth and so on. But I wanted to go; I was afraid the war was going to be over before I got there. And I got up to the psychologist, and they look at you and they start asking you questions like, "Do you like girls?" and "Do you go out with girls?" and this, everything. And the guy took one look at me and said, "You're too young, you can't go." And my face just dropped. And luckily there was another doctor sitting next to him, he looked up at me and he said, "Just a minute, I'll talk to that young fellow." So when he was finished with the person he was talking to, I went over and sat down. And you know, you're sitting there with no clothes on and you sit down on these cold steel chairs and a shudder goes through you. And he said, "Why do you want to join the Navy?" "Oh, I always liked the sea, and I always wanted to be a sailor." So he said, "Well if you're going to be a sailor, you have to be able to tie knots." He said, "You can't tie knots?" And I said, "Yeah, I can tie knots." So he opened up the desk drawer and he took out a piece of clothesline and handed it to me and said, "Let's see you tie a knot." So I had been—knot-tying had been a hobby of mine in the Boy Scouts—so I took the piece of clothesline and put it behind my back and I tied a masthead knot, which was a very beautiful and complicated-looking knot. And I showed that to him and he looked at me and said, "Okay, you're ready to go." He signed my papers and I went on my way.

As I say, I was in South Pacific; I was in the invasion of Borneo, and after the war was over went up to Okinawa [Japan] and over to Shanghai [China], spent time in Shanghai, and down into Hong Kong and then over to French Indochina [unclear]. I got to see a lot of the world, and a lot of the poorer part of the world that made me realize how fortunate we are here in the United States to have what we have.

P. Bruno: I think we need to turn it over.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Bruno: Okay.

**M. Jessen:** Because of my service in the Navy, the [unclear] was called the G.I. [Government Issue] Bill of Rights<sup>3</sup> and that entitled me to four years of college. So I applied at Rutgers, and I took up civil engineering at Rutgers. I went there for four years, and graduated with a BS [Bachelor of Science] in civil engineering. The college life for me was strange in some ways—I lived at home and commuted on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

**P. Bruno:** Did a lot of people commute at that time?

**M. Jessen:** Oh, the train that I usually caught—the same train early in the morning—I would say there was maybe twenty-five kids from Metuchen that got on the train to go to Rutgers at that time. And I hit there—it was predominantly veterans who were going to college. And the freshmen class was bigger than all of us at the college put together. In the beginning, there was started to be a little bit of hazing by the upperclassmen of the freshmen, but men who had been in the service and were paratroopers, and sailors, soldiers, pilots, and also—they weren't about to be hazed. So a few people got knocked down and the hazing stopped really quickly. And talking to people who were teachers and professors at that time, they say that was the glory days of the colleges because the students were there, they were all very serious, they were all interested in getting an education, they were demanding of the professors in that they wanted to be taught, they wanted to learn, they were there with purpose. They saw the education as a means of being important to them in their whole life because they had been in the service and seen how education helped you there. So it was a very positive time for being in college. There was some horseplay and everything, but I remember it as being predominantly serious and being a tremendous amount of work. They told us that you had two hours of work for every hour of class, and I found that to be so. And with carrying two and three laboratories plus a regular class and everything, I found that my entire time taken up with school.

However, at that time, we didn't have any hot water at home so I used to go up to the Y every day to take a shower. But I couldn't go on Tuesday because that was girls' day, so this bothered me a little bit and the secretary of the Y, Harry Williams, came in one day and he said, "You know anything about lifesaving?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, I got a little course certificate." He said, "Well, I'm looking for somebody to teach lifesaving." I said, "Well they got a course over at Rutgers that I can take." So I said, "I'll take that." So to make a long story short, I took the lifesaving course at Rutgers, and then I could go up there on Tuesdays also because I had a girls' lifesaving class so that way I got six pass a week, which was pretty good. And because I was hanging around the Y all of the time, they decided to put me on the Board of Directors, and since then I've always had an interest in the Y. Right now, I'm on the National Board of Directors. So not having hot water at home has helped me a lot as far as the Y is concerned.

I went to work when I got out of college. Looking for jobs in those days, nobody came to the college looking for people to go to work. You had to go out and scratch up your own work. And I went around and I located six jobs. And the best job was a draftsman in Plainfield in the Engineering Department there. And it didn't appeal to me particularly, but because I had been active on the Y Board of Directors,

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<sup>3</sup> The G.I. Bill of Rights was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 22, 1944 to provide services and benefits to the veterans of World War II.

another member of the Board asked me if I would want to go work for a construction operator and I said, "Yes." And because of that, I got hired by Arnolt Brothers as a field engineer. And in 1950, I worked for them for six months and it was outdoor work. I had a wonderful time and I enjoyed it tremendously.

In the end of 1950, the Korean War started, and I had been in the Naval Reserve so I got called back to active duty. And because I had a college degree, I went back as an ensign. And the Navy sent me a letter ordering me back to active duty and asking me to go to Mine Warfare School in Yorktown, Virginia. And I wrote a letter back to the Navy and I said that that would make me very unhappy going to Mine Warfare School. I didn't want to do that, but I would like to go to Naval Salvage and Diving School because I always wanted to be a deep sea diver. In about two weeks, I got my orders back, changed to the Naval Diving School in Bayonne, and in it someone had put a sheet of yellow paper and on it had written, "The last thing the Navy wants to do is make you unhappy." What I didn't know at the time was that they couldn't get any other officers to go to the Salvage and Diving School and it was alive then when I showed up. But I went to Bayonne to learn to be a deep sea diver and spent four months there in the course and had a wonderful time diving in New York Harbor from January to April—in the winter months, colder than a dead bitch.

And I graduated from there and then went to Pearl Harbor [Hawaii] where I went on a salvage ship and we traveled over the Pacific and spent most of our time in Japan and Korea, where I was a salvage and diving officer. And I think that finished making me a man; I grew up a lot during that time because I got a lot of responsibility. The first skipper I had was a man who gave everyone more work than they could handle. And he kept pushing you and pushing you, and you found out that you could do much more than you ever thought you could. And I got exposed to all different jobs and all different kinds of people and with very exacting standards because the Navy has only one way of doing things—it has to be perfect. And of course, people aren't perfect—so it never is, but you are always striving to get it perfect. And I think I enjoyed that. Looking back on it, I remember most of the good things that happened and I forget all the hours just standing around watching, shivering and going hungry, and being shot at and things like that. I think in war, there's a certain brotherhood that develops amongst those who were there and a comradeship that you don't get in [unclear]. In one way, the Korean War was like the Vietnamese War in that it wasn't a popular war. And we had very little of the finer things to fight the war with. All of the new material and everything went to Europe, because they thought the Russians were going come in through Europe. So we were working mostly with materials that were left over from World War II, which in some cases weren't the best to use.

But anyway, after a year and a half of duty there, I returned to Metuchen. And before I had left, incidentally, I had gotten married. I came back and went back to work for Arnolt Brothers as a civil engineer and they were excavating contractors, and we dug a lot of ditches and dug a lot of holes and had a wonderful time doing it. After World War II, Metuchen started to grow and all of the vacant lots that I knew as a boy gradually got houses put on them. And the bigger tracts of land in the northern part of town, on the far side of the Reading Railroad—which we used to call "Little Africa" when we were Boy Scouts—well, that became a vast housing development.

P. Bruno: Why did you call it “Little Africa?”

M. Jessen: Well, we had names for every place we went. We went out in the Potters section of Edison and there was an old, muddy stream that went through there and we called that “Mohegan River.” And over on the other side of Beacon Hill, there was an old borrow pit<sup>4</sup> that was growing up and we called that “Death Val.” We had names for every place we went. And normally our names were different than what the given geographical name was, because we didn’t think geographers would have a proper name for places we wanted to go.

As I say, right after the war, where the woods were back on the other side of the Reading Railroad, that became Clive Hills and North View Acres. And I did the clearing and the grading for North View Acres and I bought a house there and I settled down with my wife [Barbara Jane (Bruner) Jessen] and had a little boy [Martin “Skip” Andrew Jessen] and a little girl [Nancy Jessen], and they grew up there. Beacon Hill was all wooded—originally it had been a borrow pit for the Pennsylvania Railroad and they put the fills up in Rahway. And if you go there today, you can see where the hill was partially dug away, but there’s houses at the top now and houses at the bottom—and there used to be an aircraft beacon up there. When the planes flew at night, in order for them to see where they’re going, there’s a series of beacons that went from New York City all the way across the country really. And one of those beacons was at the top of that hill, and that’s why it’s called Beacon Hill.

Let’s see, Metuchen grew. As I say, it went from a town of 5,000 people up to, let’s say, 18,000 now. All of the vacant lots got filled in. Redfield Village was built, which was a garden apartment complex. The Jefferson Park [Apartments] was built, which was another garden apartment type of operation. And all of these blank spaces got filled in. Everybody was busy having kids, so the school population kept growing and growing. And the Washington School had to have additions, and the Franklin School had an addition, and the Edgar School had an addition, and they built the Campbell School. And then they needed a high school because the Franklin School was also a high school and was getting very crowded. And unfortunately, the only land they had for the high school was over on the other side of Grove Avenue. So the [Metuchen] High School was built at one edge of the town, which isn’t good for the kids walking to school, but that was done during that time.

The Franklin School, incidentally, burned down—the old wing—about fifteen years ago. Now I happened to be driving by just as it caught fire. They had an incinerator in the basement and the piece of paper flew up the stack on fire and blew over into a ventilator which was on—a wooden ventilator sticking up the top of the old school, which [had] a big slate roof on it—and it landed in there and the wind blowing on it set that on fire. And the [Metuchen] Fire Department came, they stood there while—tried to put the fire out but didn’t have the ability to do it. And the whole old section of the Franklin School burnt down, and the fire started to work its way north towards the rest of it. And the Raritan Arsenal Fire Department finally came and they put it out by going from up the inside. We were supposed to get an aerial ladder from New Brunswick and the Civil Defense had a set-up where they could call in and get the Civil Defense and then get that air out. But it happened that the fire was on a Jewish holiday, and the girl who was manning the Civil Defense was

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<sup>4</sup> A borrow pit is an area where material has been dug for use at another location.

Jewish (she was on vacation), so we never got the aerial ladder until the fire was all the way out. But after that, Metuchen got a big fire line.

Before that in [19]48, I remember the [Dutch] Reformed Church set on fire. The Reformed Church used to be up at Amboy Avenue and Graham Avenue, and it was a big wooden structure with cedar shingles on the outside and a real tall steeple. And it was built with what's called balloon construction in that the studs go from the basement all the way up to the roof. And they were having it painted and a painter was burning old paint off of one of the windows on the lower part of the steeple with a blowtorch, and a few sparks got into the space between the studs and a fire started. And of course, the smoke came out up at the top of the steeple, which was fifty feet or so up in the air, and that acted as a huge chimney. And in a very short time the steeple was on fire. And they called for the fire department.

The Eagle Hook and Ladder was not in very good shape as they had trouble getting it up the hill, and the Washington Hose Company had an old truck. These trucks were all, oh I would say, late 1920s-early 1930 trucks and they were tired by then. And they hooked on to the fire hydrant and I remember looking at the gauge and the water was coming out of the hydrant at forty pounds and coming out of the pump at sixty pounds, and it should have been coming out of the pump at 200 pounds, but the pumper was tired. And the firemen got there and they couldn't reach the steeple with the hoses—it didn't shoot that high. And the fire burned in the steeple and then it got into the church proper and they shot the hoses at the stained-glass windows and those hoses should have shattered the windows but they couldn't break them all; they had to get axes to break them. But gradually the fire worked through the church and all the way back into the Sunday school and people were carrying the books out of the pews and the [unclear; loud noise] and everything like that. But the [Metuchen] Fire Department didn't have the equipment that would stop the fire. After the fire had been going for about an hour, the Raritan Township or the Edison Fire Department came and they had a [unclear] surplus pumper that they had bought from the Army. And I remember that would pull the water out of the main at forty pounds and put it in the hose at 250 pounds. And at one time, it burst one of the hoses, it had so much pressure on it. But if we had had a pumper like that, probably we could have saved the church, at least part of the church. But there was a good part to that too because the Reformed Church moved from there up on to Franklyn Place and built that new beautiful brick church that they have there now, which is probably much nicer than what the old one was. And Metuchen Fire Department got new fire trucks. All of those things happened.

Locally here, I've always tried to take part in community activities. I've been associated with the Metuchen Savings and Loan [Association] for a lot of years and that's a small banking institution that started in the late 1890s, and now it's one of the leading financial institutions.

P. Bruno: Did it have trouble like other banks during the Depression?

M. Jessen: Yes, they did. This was before my time, but the—it's not before my time, but it's before my time of lending the banking institution—but the [Metuchen] National Bank went bad. They went bankrupt and went out of business. The Commonwealth Bank hung on and the [Metuchen] Savings and Loan hung on. But in order to hang on, the Savings and Loan and all of the banks had to foreclose a lot of mortgages. And the mortgage on my father-in-law's house was foreclosed. And we can't picture

it today, but people had houses in which they had a mortgage which only represented 25 percent of the value of the house. They might have bought the house for \$4,000, and they only owed \$1,000 or \$800 on the mortgage, but nobody had any money and you couldn't sell it to anybody because there was nobody buying any houses. And the banking institutions foreclosed the mortgages on them, and in most cases ended up owning them themselves until they finally got rid of them.

The Metuchen Savings and Loan, which was called the Metuchen Building and Loan at that time when it first started, it started a development in the Woodwild Park area. And all of the streets over there that have tree names—Linden [Avenue], Oak [Avenue], [East] Chestnut [Avenue]—they were part of the development. They bought the land off a man named [Thomas W.] Strong and divided it up into lots, and then sold the lots mostly to people in New York City as a place for people to move to get away from the city because they had good train service and everything. And looking at the old records of it, they never made any money at doing this, but they did develop one of the nicer parts of our town by the way they did it.

As I said, I've been associated with the YMCA and I've seen that go from a small building and a small pool that [Charles S.] Edgar had donated to the town, to the large institution that it is today that serves not only Metuchen but Edison also. I've been interested in the [Metuchen] Historical Commission and I've helped some in trying to nail down some of our history so that future generations will have some idea of what happened here. I've been interested in the Boy Scouts and my church, which happens to be the Reformed Church. Although interestingly enough, I started out in the [Centenary] Methodist [Episcopal] Church, which is on the corner of Main [Street] and Middlesex [Avenue], and while I was going to college, I was the Sunday school superintendent there. And I married a girl who was a Presbyterian, and we couldn't decide on what church to go to, so we ended up at the Reformed Church. I always tell people I got thrown out of the Methodist Church for marrying a Presbyterian, but that's not so. What else would you like to hear about?

P. Bruno: How about your work on the [Metuchen] Chamber of Commerce and a little bit about the fairs that you have every year?

M. Jessen: Well, an awful lot of jobs I have gotten is because no one else would take them, and one of those jobs was with the 300th Anniversary of New Jersey. Each town had to have a committee about it and I was appointed as chairman of that committee, and we tried to think up ideas of things that would help the town and would help in a historical nature, and also be of a festive nature. And one of the ideas was to have a sidewalk sale and we decided to call it a fair, and they thought, *Well, we'll call it a country fair*. And then as people talked about the idea, they said, "Well instead of having it on the sidewalk, why don't we put people in the middle of the street." So then we said, "Well if we're going to do that, we ought to block the traffic off." And out of that evolved the [Metuchen] Country Fair, and we had the first one in 1964. And we blocked off Main Street from Pennsylvania Avenue down to Highland Avenue, and we had about ninety organizations take part in it. We had the whole center of the street full of booths and we had cotton candy, and hot dogs, and hamburgers, and weight guessing games, and all sorts of fair activities.

And if there was anything different about our idea, it was that we asked all of the civic groups to participate in it—church groups, political groups, firemen, police reserves. And each of them could do what they wished as a fundraiser and they

could keep the money that they raised, so we attracted a lot of groups into the fair activity. And it went over as such a success that the Chamber of Commerce elected to take over the running of it and to make it an annual affair. And it helped the town, I think, in many ways because we had all of these different groups involved, and today we have groups that come from as far away as Montgomery Township and predominately church groups. These people come to Metuchen to take part in the fair—they come from Montgomery, they bring baked goods, and things like that. We have a flower club from over here out of South Plainfield and they bring plants. And we have a lot of local groups too. All of these people come, and because they're at the fair, or they have Aunt Sadie and Uncle Louie come, and their neighbors and everything to come and see and everything, and we've been able to attract around 25,000 people on fair day. And this has given the merchants, in the downtown area particularly, a chance to show other people what their stores are like and what their merchandise is about.

And I don't know whether this is the direct cause of it or not, but Metuchen is unique in it has no empty stores in it. But all around, all the other towns here and the shopping centers are taking the business away from the downtown areas to the degree that there are empty stores. In Plainfield, they've torn them down; New Brunswick, they've torn a tremendous number down, and Metuchen it hasn't happened. Why hasn't it happened? One of the reasons, I think, is the country fair in that we've been able to bring people to our town and tell them how nice it is. The other reason is we've been able to keep it nice. It's a fragile thing. How can we keep it from changing and yet keep up with progress?

P. Bruno: It's a hard thing to do.

M. Jessen: It's very hard to do, and I think we have to be very careful in all the things we've proposed to try to look ahead and see what the ultimate effect will be on it. Just doing things for the sake of progress is not necessarily the right thing to do. It's got to be thought out a little bit. We were able to put trees back on Main Street at a tremendous amount of trouble, a tremendous amount of trouble. Merchants were against it. And it's interesting that some of the guys that yelled the loudest against it after we put the first ten trees up, they wanted to make sure that when we got the next ten up, they got one in front of their store. So that's turned out to be a plus. In the Chamber of Commerce, we don't have much merchant activity and this is typical of most chambers of commerce. Most of the work in the chamber is done by people that are in the industries or professions in town. But I think that's probably all right because the merchant is the kind of person who has to stay in the store most of the time. That's the nature of the business. So I think that's been a plus. What else can I tell you?

P. Bruno: I can't think of anything else. We managed to cover just about everything! I think it's been a good tape. Thank you very much.

M. Jessen: Very good. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]