

Marie Pratcher

Date:

Interviewer: Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Michael Macan

Transcribers:

Editor:

Abstract: Marie Bruno Pratscher

Born on Clive Street, Metuchen, and then family moved to South Main Street. Father was a sculptor with office in New York City. She modeled from some of his statues that were placed on churches, office buildings and schools. Family had a gorgeous garden and made bouquets for weddings. Eventually, Marie and her husband, Phil Pratscher, opened a florist in Plainfield, New Jersey. Now retired, but has amusing stories of travels in Europe.

During this interview,

Interview note:

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P. Boeddinghaus: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... Michael Macan and Marie will now tell us about her interesting childhood growing up in Metuchen. [recording paused]

Well, I'm going to ask you a few questions. [recording paused]

Yeah, right here. You want to put your feet on this?

M. Pratcher: No.

P. Boeddinghaus: Your legs are kind of short.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, I'm short. Oh, that will be nice. [unclear talking in background] I have been collecting the Orientals for quite a while now since the 1970s.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I've got make sure this is on. So make sure I get it. [recording paused]

Marie Bruno Pratcher is being interviewed by Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Michael Macan in an informal manner. [recording paused]

Now we're going to start Marie.

M. Pratcher: Okay.

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, I think we'd like to start and you could tell us where your parents are from?

M. Pratcher: Well, my father was named Lucin Vincent Bruno and he was born in Paris, and I have the exact – I have it on the birth certificate the exact house [unclear] because of course they were born in houses in those days. And I found the house when I – I've been to Paris five times – and I always go to see the house. 48 Boulevard de Pictos in Paris. And the area, the different regions, called they say it in French, Nation, N-a-t-i-o-n, they have it in like little section, Boroughs like, and I found the house. It's stone, must have been an apartment house, and that's why it's so visited, born in 1886. And I had such a thrill opening the door, it was a real door and there was a circular staircase going up. And of course, it's warm where the people are stepping on it, so I put my footprints right in those things. And a woman opened up the door, and she "Ques que vu?" what do you say it, well you look at her. Oh, I said a little bit of French that I know and I said, "Cherez per familie Bruno?" Oh, mother said they don't live here anymore. I knew that, but I just wanted to say something. It was just a thrill. Then I went outside, took a picture, and there was a nice woman with flowerpots on the windowsill, and I was trying to get her attention, as soon as she saw me take a picture, she went inside. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: So your father was French? Or was he Italian?

M. Pratcher: No. Well, his mother was French. So we got the address of – oh, I'll tell you, on the birth certificate, it shown where he was born, and so my sister-in-law, my brother Red Bruno, he surmised that they had the address of the father and the mother, his father and mother, and they figured well maybe they were married in this area. So they went to the Catholic Church in there, it was in the records, they registered, of their marriage in that church.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's a good way to trace a lot of genealogy is through the church records.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. And then, she came from Nante, outside of Paris. My brother rented a car and they went to the town and they knew my grandmother. Her name was Chante Claire. It was a family name and it was Elaine Chante Claire, Eloise Chante Claire. And the one woman knew – well, yes, she's one of two daughters that went to Paris. They were seamstresses. But she married a chef, sure if that was my grandfather.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, yes. That's interesting.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, and then my father, he went to school in Ecole, means school, the Fountainbleu. The Cordinbleu, the Fountainbleu, I think, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: The cooking for gourmet cooking.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. And then my father was five years old, he and his family, they had the son and another boy – I can't think of his first name – but anyway, he's lost in the World War I. And then my aunt, my father's sister, Aunt Rose, and they came to this country before the Ellis Island opened up. And they know the city that came

first class, I was impressed, because my grandfather had a job to work at the Waldorf Astoria as a chef. And that's why they were quite well off. But my grandfather said he never wanted his sons to be chefs because they had no unions in those days. But they said they remember he, in his apron or something, he would bring parts of roasts and stuff for the family. I guess they hate to throw things away like me.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then, when your parents came to the United States, they came to New York? Did you say he worked at the Waldorf Astoria?

M. Pratcher: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then how many children did they have?

M. Pratcher: Well, they already had a daughter, Rose, and Louis was the other name because my grandfather's name was Louis, but they called him Louie, yeah. But [unclear] the Waldorf, and I have a cookbook written in French on the special sauces my grandfather had to make for, in those days, the Astors, and the Vanderbuilts, and the Rockfellers, they were big – should I say come the wall [unclear] and then they come around midnight or late, you know they don't eat at six o'clock over there. Anyhow, he had to make special sauces for this one, for that one. Never forget, he told me one time that they wanted him to come to the table and thank the chef. So he had to put his new high hat and the clean apron, of course, and they thanked him at the table for his services. He was very flattered. And I recently went to the hotel and I brought a bunch from my seniors group, and we had a luncheon. And they were surprised to have strawberry omelets and things we don't think about here, not just cheese omelets. And then I asked the chef, the maître-de, if he could have the chef who served us come to the table. And he came with his high hat, and we –

P. Boeddinghaus: What was your maiden name then?

M. Pratcher: My maiden name? Bruno.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's right. I knew that.

M. Pratcher: Marie Bruno. Hi, there.

P. Boeddinghaus: This is Michael Macan. This is Mrs. Pratcher.

M. Pratcher: Hi Michael.

M. Macan: Nice to meet you.

M. Pratcher: Do you live in Metuchen?

M. Macan: Yes.

M. Pratcher: Where?

M. Macan: Over on Rolfe Place, off Court.

P. Boeddinghaus: Rose Street.

M. Pratcher: Oh, Rose Street. Oh yes, I know that there. Mine is in yesteryear and yours is in most recent year. [chuckles]

M. Macan: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Michael is a contemporary of Carla's, our youngest daughter. They were in high school together.

M. Pratcher: Oh, that's nice.

P. Boeddinghaus: Both graduated from college.

M. Pratcher: From the same college?

P. Boeddinghaus: No, same high school. Michael went to Rutgers

M. Pratcher: Oh yeah. All my family went to Rutgers, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: I'll remind both of you to speak up. You both have small voices.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, my husband was a graduate [unclear] education [unclear] teacher.

P. Boeddinghaus: Your husband Phil Pratcher?

M. Pratcher: Yeah, Phil Pratcher, yeah. He was born in Perth Amboy. He taught in schools in Perth Amboy, the vocational school, and in Metuchen as a substitute there. When we took over the flower shop and I think we took that over in 41. Well, that's a story too.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's another story, Marie and her husband Phil once owned Kaiser's Flower Shop. She's saying early forties.

M. Pratcher: We were so surprised I think because the war came along and my husband was drafted. But then he didn't – six months, every six months he was getting a certificate of deferment to teach another six months because they said if we had any more, we would lose – the school would have to close if we took the teachers. But two days after we sold the shop, then we got another deferment. Meantime, we sold the shop. I cried. Oh, I was born and brought up in Metuchen. Oh, I cried because I was expecting a baby, my first child. That was – not trouble, but that was the reason for [unclear]. That was a catastrophe. But it sure changed my life, and my children lives.

10:00

P. Boeddinghaus:

M. Pratcher:

P. Boeddinghaus:

M. Pratcher:

P. Boeddinghaus: It's on. [recording paused]

So then you [recording cuts out] on your father's farm and with the produce and the fresh flowers that you—did you go into Perth Amboy to that farmer market?

M. Pratcher: Perth Amboy Market, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: And did your sisters get involved with this either?

M. Pratcher: No, they weren't there. The time when my father went to the Amboy Market is the time when the fire engine, which crosses Smith Street, was hit by a train and killed a number of people¹.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh no. In all the oral histories, I've never heard about that before.

M. Pratcher: Right. The market was tremendous, Phyllis. It was at least six blocks long. It was from way past New Brunswick Avenue to the left, and all the way into Smith Street. The market was at least three-quarters of a mile long. That's how big the farming used to—as farmers, it was the main industry in Middlesex County at one time. You know, besides, what else was there? There was no other plant except clay pits and brickyards and all that.

P. Boeddinghaus: So that was one of the main businesses—the fresh produce and meat and chickens and flowers.

M. Pratcher: Yes, that's right.

P. Boeddinghaus: Fruit.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. Well, you know there was plenty of fruit because there were still a lot of orchards still around.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you see a big change then with the industries that come into the area.

M. Pratcher: That's right.

P. Boeddinghaus: And did you ever work at the Raritan Arsenal?

M. Pratcher: Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, you did.

M. Pratcher: I worked there during the war. That's the Second [World] War, that's not—the First [World] War, I was only six and seven years old, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Because that was called Camp Raritan.

¹ Nine firemen from the Eagle Engine Company in Perth Amboy were killed when their fire truck struck a locomotive at the Market Street at-grade crossing of the Central Railway of New Jersey (CNJ) on June 15, 1921.

M. Pratcher: That's right.

P. Boeddinghaus: And I've seen pictures of the barracks and the different buildings.

M. Pratcher: Where the golf course was, that was all lined with cannons. That was all lined with cannons. There must have been 300 or 400 cannons in that field. After that, I don't know where the cannons were, but I know that Fedak's son-in-law bought a lot of army trucks and they were parked at what they called the Union Hotel.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, remember that building?

M. Pratcher: Right. You know where the Victorian Manor [Royal Grand Manor at 2863 Woodbridge Avenue in Edison] is?

P. Boeddinghaus: Um-hm, yes.

M. Pratcher: Well, you could ask there so you probably have to go through that anyhow (the tape), won't you?

P. Boeddinghaus: Right.

M. Pratcher: All right. You ask the questions, I give the answers.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. About the Raritan Arsenal, my mother worked there too.

M. Pratcher: Well, your mother worked in World War II.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, but you were too young to work during World War I.

M. Pratcher: Yes, right.

P. Boeddinghaus: But you worked there during World War II. What do you think about all this ammunition they're finding under the ground?

M. Pratcher: Well, to tell you the truth, they'll find the ammunition because from what I gather years ago, even they bulldozed trucks and all that. Well, they didn't have bulldozers then, but they had road scrapers and all that. And they're the ones that were doing the dig—I don't know how they were digging the holes, but there is one guy around here—he's older than me—and he's the one they should contact up there. And that's Julius Lanky [phonetic]. He worked in ammunition; he was foreman for the Ammunition Department before the war and after the war. And he's the one that was discharging all the ammunition.

P. Boeddinghaus: It's kind of scary, you know. Like here we've lived so innocently all these years and not knowing what was down there.

M. Pratcher: Oh yeah. Another thing is when you're talking about the ammunition, Alex Messerole, a cousin of mine, and all these Bonhamtown boys were picking up these bands off of 105mm guns. They had brass bands on there on the shell. And they were selling them, they were taking them, they're stealing them from the Arsenal and selling them to the junkman there. And my cousin accidentally picked one up (a part of a shell) and threw it against a railroad track and it

exploded and knocked three fingers off on him. See a lot of people don't know that. That was where they detonated the shells; that was a railroad that went through the clay pits. And that's where they were firing the caps so they would be useless.

P. Boeddinghaus: That is a tremendous track down there, isn't it? I realize more and more what a tremendous place that is.

M. Pratcher: The track went all the way from Woodbridge Avenue, all the way to the [Raritan] River where the barges used to load the clay and take it to destination. That's where they used to—there was a dock by the Raritan River that was as far down as you could go, and that's where they detonated—or the clay pits were loaded on barges and I don't know where they went because when you're small like that—

P. Boeddinghaus: That's right and they're probably sold to places that are— [recording paused]

So when you were growing up in that area, did you think you had a happy childhood? Have a carefree life, working hard?

M. Pratcher: Absolutely, that's right. As far as you're going there, we could tell you that we weren't neglected in anything. Wintertime, we had all the skating we wanted. Summertime, the pond was there and we could have all the swimming we wanted.

P. Boeddinghaus: Lots of good vegetables and fruit. Worked hard, played.

M. Pratcher: Right, yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you feel you had a pleasant childhood?

M. Pratcher: Well, being that we couldn't go to the movies all the time, it wasn't bad. [laughter] No, the only thing I found—I don't even know if we had a radio until later years. I don't think anybody did, you know what I mean? But as far as being—there was enough kids in Bonhamtown that we could associate with because there was always—

P. Boeddinghaus: Playmates, things to do.

M. Pratcher: Yes. And after the war, every Sunday, there was a free movie in the Arsenal where the whole town was invited. There were the religious services and then they had a picture show, which was free.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was a big part of your life then, the Raritan Arsenal? Part of your social life? That's interesting. Well, you certainly have seen tremendous changes along [US] Route 1 and coming into Metuchen and all around. We're all surrounded by the industrial growth. Do you have any hobbies?

M. Pratcher: Me?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. I know you're active in the Elks [Metuchen Elks Lodge No. 1914], but any other hobbies?

M. Pratcher: Oh geez, I don't want to mention them.

P. Boeddinghaus: Collect arrowheads or anything? [laughs]

M. Pratcher: No.

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay. And what other organizations you were interested in belonging to?

M. Pratcher: Well, I don't want—I could leave that out. I could leave that out.

P. Boeddinghaus: All right, sure. I asked you a lot about the Raritan Arsenal. Now what do you think of these recent storms we've had? Boy, we've had a lot of problems with the weather.

M. Pratcher: The only storm I could remember that competes to that is a snowstorm we had some time in 1919 or something (or [19]22) where the snow was piled as high as a trolley car. That I remember there. In them days, there were no road scrapers. The trolleys used to have a plow in front of them, and they're the ones that used to plow the road, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: I heard too that in South Metuchen there was a horse-drawn wooden plow to do the sidewalks so the men could get to the station.

M. Pratcher: That I don't know.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever ride that trolley that went through Bonhamtown and Metuchen and back and forth?

M. Pratcher: Well, the trolley went from New Brunswick to Perth Amboy. And I don't know, it went around Metuchen, or it went so far in Metuchen and then it went straight back. I think it must have come down to near the station, and that was the end of the line. And then it went back to Perth Amboy. It came straight down, and they used to turn the pole around on the electric pole they had there. Because I know when we were kids and they used to—a number of us kids (wise birds)—as the trolley was coming in Bonhamtown, we'd be wise birds and as the trolley would slow down, we'd run out of the bushes and pull the pole off the wire to agitate the—

P. Boeddinghaus: To stall the trolley. [laughs]

M. Pratcher: Agitate the conductor, you know what I mean? [laughter] Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: I hear a lot of pleasant memories about that trolley, that the man who ran it was so pleasant, so helpful. If a housewife needed a loaf of bread or something, he'd stop and get it and deliver it.

M. Pratcher: Yes, they [recording cuts out] something happened and they couldn't get out, the conductor would pick up something for them on the road. And as far as we're talking about farm products and everything, it was very few places where a milkman came because most of the neighbors had cows and you bought the milk from the neighbors. You know what I mean?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. Yes, I do.

M. Pratcher: So many things that transpired that you could fill up real books with it in sections. And as far as food [is] concerned, there was always somebody that would slaughter a pig or a calf. And maybe on a Saturday, he'd slaughter two or three pigs. And the neighbors would start selling the meat as fast as they would cut it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, it seemed to be then you were all self-sustaining then. You'd get the milk or the meat from your neighbor and they would buy the produce from you.

M. Pratcher: Yes, you're absolutely right. That is a section in its own where that people didn't have to rely upon going to the store because they canned their own food. I know my mother, we used to can peaches and pears and—

P. Boeddinghaus: Berries. Probably you picked berries.

M. Pratcher: Oh yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: A lot of blueberries in the area, weren't there?

M. Pratcher: That's right. There were blueberries there. It was no trouble of being able to survive.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was it on the barter system or did you pay each other for the exchange?

M. Pratcher: Well, the milk was a bought system. But another thing, as far as you go, it was such a close knit of families that if one had a child, the parent would be going to work and the neighbor would be taking care of—

P. Boeddinghaus: The baby?

M. Pratcher: Yes. Sometime there'd be two of us in a crib. I have one gal (she's not married yet) and she'll be as old as—well, she'll be eighty-some in September—her and I were in the same crib. And our mother went to the cigar factory in New Brunswick to work. Then maybe six months after, she [mother] would go and get pregnant and somebody else would be taking care of the kids. So everybody had a chance to be able to without any pay or whatsoever.

P. Boeddinghaus: Not like you have today with the daycare centers and all.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. And if a neighbor baked a bread, bake two so the other neighbor gave one to the neighbor.

P. Boeddinghaus: More of a sharing of what everybody had, they shared it. That must have been a wonderful way to live. And nobody kept track, you know? It was just whatever, goodwill.

M. Pratcher: Phyllis, it was a good omen; these are some of the things I remember. I don't remember all of it because, you know, you think about going out and playing baseball when your kid or doing something like that in there. Ninety percent of the people only had well water anyhow. Ninety-nine percent, in fact 100 percent went there because Main Street wasn't even paved. The only thing on Main Street was a trolley car line, and the trolley car line ran from New Brunswick to

Perth Amboy and back. The other line ran from New Brunswick to Newark; that was the Green Line². See, the Green Line (US [Route] 1 and Main Street)—if you get in the middle of Main Street, you look to your right about fifty feet or so there, and that’s where the Green Line went right into Newark. It went through Rahway, Elizabeth, and Newark. That was before all the trains. There were very few trains that were going through Metuchen then.

P. Boeddinghaus: So that was like a main source of transportation to get any distance?

M. Pratcher: That’s right, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: You mentioned before about the influenza outbreak.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, the influenza³. I don’t know if anybody has any literature on that. Do you think anybody has any literature? Because I know that there was me, and I think my two or three sisters, were in a basement in a house and we were—our doctor was a doctor by the name of Gross.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah. Tell me more about Dr. [Herman] Gross. I’ve heard something on the tapes about him.

M. Pratcher: Dr. Gross lived on the corner of—what’s the post office on? Woodbridge Avenue? What’s the other one?

P. Boeddinghaus: Clinton. Clinton Place.

M. Pratcher: Is it Clinton?

P. Boeddinghaus: Main and Clinton.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. He lived in that stucco house [at 344 Main Street]. That’s where his office was. And he was treating everybody in Bonhamtown on influenza. And his object was drink as much—it was Prohibition⁴ days anyhow, but I don’t know how we got whiskey and all that. Whiskey was being made because everybody was bootlegging. And everybody had some. If you didn’t have it, your neighbor had it and you bought it from him. And his object was feeding all the people with influenza with booze, and he happened to take a dose of it and passed away in influenza.

P. Boeddinghaus: I heard that on another tape. You know who did a tape was Nathan Gross, his nephew, who had the grocery store up in the corner of Woodbridge Avenue and Amboy Avenue, in that area. Gross’ Corner. Remember Gross’ Corner?

M. Pratcher: Yeah.

² The trolley line is more commonly referred to as the “Fast Line,” which was operated by the Public Service Corporation and included a number of smaller short-distance lines that extended from Trenton to Newark.

³ The influenza outbreak is known as the Spanish flu, a deadly pandemic that infected a quarter of the world’s population from 1918 to 1920.

⁴ Prohibition was a nationwide constitution ban on the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, he did a tape in telling about his uncle who died of influenza.

M. Pratcher: I remember Dr. Gross real good.

P. Boeddinghaus: Do you?

M. Pratcher: Oh, yes. Dr. Gross was—I can’t visualize who else we had in Metuchen at that time. I think [Dr. Clarence] Hofer [physician at 463 Main Street] was one of them, I’m pretty sure. I don’t know if Wittnebert was one. Did you ever hear of him?

P. Boeddinghaus: I’ve heard different doctors’ names and it escapes me. But this Gross family also had a hotel on Main Street: the Hillside Hotel, the Hillside Inn⁵?

M. Pratcher: Oh yeah. That was a brewery. Nobody knows that but me. That was a brewery on top of the hill, right behind the bank [Metuchen Savings Bank]. Right up on top of the hill, I remember all the brewery and where they were distributing beer. I don’t know what else there but the beer boxes and all that. The brewery that [was] there. That was the Gross’ brewery. From there, they moved to Sand Hills.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah. Out that way? Yeah.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. Then they had a hotel [rented cottages] where—you know where Sandy Hill School [Sand Hills School formerly located along King Georges Road in Edison] is?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

M. Pratcher: Down the street from there, the old road from Bonhamtown to Fords going through Raritan Center, and you passed their hotel. And that’s where their brewery went from Metuchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: Because there’s a picture here in the Grimstead Room [Metuchen-Edison Historical Society’s archives] of that hotel [Hillside Inn]. It looked very pretty; it was a lawn, a terrace, a big veranda. And then some of the people who were working at the Raritan Arsenal would live there temporarily until they could find a house or an apartment to rent.

M. Pratcher: That part I [don’t] know. All I know is that the Grosses had that and the other. There was about five or six Grosses. There was Nathan Gross, then there was the boy, then there was a brother, and they were all in one kind of business or whatsoever. Gross there—I’m pretty sure that—well, I was only a kid (seven years old), so you know I’m only trying to visualize what happened with them. It’s something that—you know you remember a lot of things there where you come back to you every now and then, but what happened yesterday you don’t realize. But there’s some—people don’t know—that’s one of the items. And the ice house is another item that was in the Mill Pond.

⁵ The inn was located in Metuchen along Main Street between Hillside Avenue and Highland Avenue.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now what was that name, Eggert⁶?

M. Pratcher: No, that was Lawrence [phonetic].

P. Boeddinghaus: Lawrence [phonetic]?

M. Pratcher: Right. Lawrence's Ice House [phonetic].

P. Boeddinghaus: Is that where Grimstead would have gotten his ice? Remember the Grimstead boys⁷ from Bonhamtown?

M. Pratcher: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember any of them.

P. Boeddinghaus: Then they moved into Metuchen. But anyway, at that Mill Pond, that's where they get the ice?

M. Pratcher: Yeah. They had an ice house where they had a conveyer that pulled the ice from the pond. There used to be at least twelve inches thick, if not better. And they packed it in salt hay⁸ and used it all during half of the summer.

P. Boeddinghaus: Isn't that terrific that it lasted that long?

M. Pratcher: That's right, because it was packed in salt hay. The salt hay covered the ice.

P. Boeddinghaus: Protected from that.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. I don't know if there's any salt hay. But also, is when you're talking about salt hay, there used to be a salt hay farm, two of them. One on Meadow Road in Edison, that was Hennerson's Salt Mine [phonetic]. And then there was one where the Raritan Center is now: [Nels] Kistrup. That was the biggest. Did you hear of them?

P. Boeddinghaus: I know that name (Kistrup) from around here, yes.

M. Pratcher: He had also a salt hay farm. They used to cut the salt hay twice a year, and pack it, and bale it, and sell it. So they had the farm. That's the only industry that they had, was the salt hay. And that happened to hold most of the few. You know it's a different story today or in them days, you could live on, say, peanuts compared—you could live two, three weeks on what you—a month for what you spent today for one meal. You know what I mean?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, true. Inflation and everything.

⁶ The Eggert family owned the gristmill during the nineteenth century that was located on the south side of Old Post Road to the east of Mill Road. The mill was originally powered by water from Mill Pond before a steam engine was added to turn the turbine waterwheel.

⁷ The Grimstead brothers, uncles of J. Lloyd Grimstead, operated an ice business near their home on Old Post Road. The ice was cut from the Mill Pond on the north side of Old Post Road and was stored in the ice house and later hauled and sold to Metuchen households.

⁸ Salt hay is saltmeadow grass (*Spartina patens*) that grows along the eastern coast of North America. It was actively farmed prior to 1920 and used as bedding and feed for livestock. It was also used as insulation in the walls of homes and ice houses to prevent freezing during cold weather.

M. Pratcher: Well, yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: We used some salt hay years ago in the flower shop [Jack's Flower Shop at 182 Main Street]. Jack would make a spray bar to make the funeral work and that—I don't know where he got that. Well, there were feed and grain places in Metuchen, weren't there, for the animals? There were a lot of animals.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. Right alongside the railroad there was a—

P. Boeddinghaus: What was that name? Crowell? Was that Crowell's?

M. Pratcher: Crowell, Crowell. There's another story about Crowell. There was one Crowell, and then there was Crowell's wife; they lived on Rector Street. And the other one—the one, not Crowell, but—Crowell⁹ was the husband, and he would [be] delivering feed and all that to all the farms around here and accidentally he got kicked by a horse and died.

P. Boeddinghaus: There at the feed store [W. A. Crowell & Son]?

M. Pratcher: Yeah, the feed store was right alongside the railroad [at 389 Main Street]. You know where the flower shop is now? Or where the hardware [Metuchen Hardware at 401 Main Street] was? There was a little alley there, and that's where—maybe you remember that feed store, don't you?

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, yeah; forty-five years ago. But then it was probably going out because they stopped with the animals back there.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, but there was a little dock there where you pulled a truck or your horse and wagon, and they would pull the bag of weed or bale of hay there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was there another feed store up around Amboy Avenue and Main Street [Thomas Eggert Feed and Grain Store]? Was there one up in that general neighborhood?

M. Pratcher: I don't remember.

P. Boeddinghaus: Where that gas station is now? How about down on Lake Avenue? There was something down on Lake Avenue, that big building¹⁰ that Ernie Docs had real estate in. Was that some sort of feed store?

M. Pratcher: I don't remember any at all because we did all the dealing with Crowell, yeah. The Crowells¹¹ I know lived on the corner of Rector Street and Highland Avenue, yes, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you deal with Grosses? Did your parents get groceries from them?

⁹ The Crowell that Mr. Fater mentions as being killed by a horse may be Reginald Bulkley Crowell, who was the son of William A. Crowell. Both men worked at W. A. Crowell & Son Feed Store at 389 Main Street. Reginald Bulkley Crowell died in 1926, leaving behind his wife Helen Louise Crowell and their three children.

¹⁰ She is referring to the Dawson Building at 257 Lake Avenue, which formerly housed the Belden Manufacturing Company.

¹¹ Mr. Crowell may be referring to Stewart and Edith Crowell, who lived at 60 Rector Street during the 1920s.

M. Pratcher: **Yeah, we got groceries from them [William Gross and Brother]. Also, they delivered by wagonloads. You know what I mean?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I heard that he, and Nathan Gross told that story whereby the boys would come into Iselin, Metuchen, and the surrounding area and get the list from the housewife, go back–

M. Pratcher: **Yeah, that's right, fill the orders–**

P. Boeddinghaus: –fill the order and redeliver in time for the housewife to make dinner. That must have been fabulous. Of course, you didn't have the telephone as much then.

M. Pratcher: **And not only that, Phyllis; that's only part of it. The thing about it is, people used to come from New Brunswick (the Jewish population) with a pack on their back, bringing the shirts, pants, shoes, everything.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, let's see that was all their belongings or they were going to try and sell it?

M. Pratcher: **They're selling them.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Selling it. Selling garments.

M. Pratcher: **You know peddlers**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I see.

M. Pratcher: **Peddlers. Yeah, there's so much things that transpired, like what they called ragpickers. You know the people don't realize, some of these things that you will be able to solve there, is the ragpicker would come with a horse and wagon and pull the chain and pick up all the clothes and weigh it with a scale and pay you for all your rags and–you know what? You save for weeks and weeks, you know that you're not going to use–they're ripped clothes and all that. The ragpickers would give you about two, three cents a pound. So there are so many things that people today, any artist or something would write a book here. It would be a best seller of what has transpired through the years that I know of. And I'm going back seventy-five years, what I'm telling you now, because I'll be eighty-two next weekend. So I'm talking about seventy-five years ago, so that's quite a–you know what I mean?**

P. Boeddinghaus: A length of time. Well, they didn't have like the Goodwill box. And probably they would give things away and help out each other out with the old clothing, passed down.

M. Pratcher: **Oh, definitely, definitely. Nobody threw anything away. Not like today, if you can't have it cleaned and dyed, out it goes there. And you go to flea market–somebody tells me he went to the flea market. He bought a package there and it had twenty shirts in it. Brand new ones! He paid two dollars for this package unseen; it was twenty brand new shirts in it. So yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I'd just like to tell you a quick story. When I was a kid in Highland Park, the ragpicker came around. And he looked very unkempt and everything. And my mother [Evelyn Smith] had a pair of slippers, and she never wore them. So I gave it to the ragpicker

and when I told my mother—I felt sorry for him, so—he looked so poor and everything. Oh, she was furious with me. She says, “Don’t you know he just dresses like that. He’s actually a millionaire.” [laughter]

M. Pratcher: **Yeah but, you know Phyllis, you know because—as far as I’m talking there, all of these people, they were pretty nice. They were friendly. Very few people had trouble with their neighbors because [coughs] anytime there was a slaughter of a hog, everybody would go over the neighbors and then they would cook or fry pork, filet them, you know all this stuff and—**

P. Boeddinghaus: They shared.

M. Pratcher: **Yes. And then they made their sausage or what they call Hungarian kolbasz. And Bonhamtown was one of the towns that was a Hungarian settlement.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Very industrious and hard-working.

M. Pratcher: **Right, yes. Besides the Union Hotel then or whatever it was, that was the only gin mill. But you know when Prohibition came around, it was a matter of people were doing their own cooking for booze because they had their own stills. Ninety percent of the people had their own stills. So that’s one of the things I could remember too, that during Prohibition, there was no liquor and people would have to buy there, have their own stills, and—**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, like everybody knew it, but nobody talked about it? I mean they knew they had it, but it wasn’t public.

M. Pratcher: **Not until somebody squealed on them and then they got caught. But they didn’t press the issue until somebody complained, yeah. So if there’s anything else you have, Phyllis?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Let’s see, can you think of something else? What did you take up in vo-tech [vocational-technical program]?

M. Pratcher: **Well, in vo-tech, I took up a machinist. But I didn’t fare so well with it until the war came.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, then you were able to utilize the skills.

M. Pratcher: **That’s right, because—Phyllis, you and Jack have been through a little bit of a mill too, as far as business was concerned.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, yes.

M. Pratcher: **You know what I mean? You had a few hard knocks there when he was in the service. So you should know the situation. You know that it’s not bad—now you are in better shape. As far as anything goes, if you don’t get sick, you’ll survive. But if you’re going to get sick and get bedridden, you’re not going to survive because they’ll take everything from you.**

P. Boeddinghaus: What do you think of all this healthcare business today? That’s quite a problem, isn’t it?

M. Pratcher: Well, I wish they would do something about it. Somebody called me in the research about it two hours ago. I don't know who it was, but asked for a pile of questions. I didn't mind their questions about what to do about healthcare and environment and all that, but I don't want to bother with politics. That "What do you think of Walsh?" "What do you think of this one?" "What do you think of that one?" I don't know what they're up to because I'm not—it doesn't faze me any there. If I see somebody honest and I like, I don't care if they're Democrats or Republicans. [It] isn't going to do me some good, or do some of my friends some good, or some kids or school. If I like them, I'll try to help them. But outside of that, you've got to be careful. I don't know who's on the other end of the line. But she was—whatever it was—pretty nice, at least five minutes up there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I don't know. See Jack had some surgery lately, and you know the hospital bill and the doctor bill and it's just out of sight. How can the general public—?

M. Pratcher: See, I don't know. Well, it was two years ago, May—well, I had Dr. Quinto [phonetic]. Is that on?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Do you want it off?

M. Pratcher: Yeah. [recording paused]

P. Boeddinghaus: [recording continues mid-sentence] ... about your marriage. What year were you married?

M. Pratcher: I was; yesterday was my fifty-fourth anniversary.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you were married in—

M. Pratcher: I'm married fifty-four years.

P. Boeddinghaus: You were married in 1938, something like that?

M. Pratcher: Thirty-eight or thirty-nine; [19]39.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah.

M. Pratcher: Fifty-four years. That's right. And I've been around this part of the country for fifty-four years.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was your wife from Bonhamtown area?

M. Pratcher: No, that's from New Brunswick.

P. Boeddinghaus: She's from New Brunswick.

M. Pratcher: Right. You ask, and then I'll reply.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. Her name is Mary, right?

M. Pratcher: My wife's name is Julia.

P. Boeddinghaus: Julia! Julia. Oh, excuse me! Julia. And your son?

M. Pratcher: Joseph.

P. Boeddinghaus: Remember when you had your son?

M. Pratcher: Yeah. That's seven years later, I guess. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I remember you took such good care of him, and very protective. Where is he now?

M. Pratcher: He's outside of Chicago [Illinois], yeah. He's an industrial hygienist.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, that's interesting

M. Pratcher: Yeah. He knows air pollution, environment health, hazard industry. He does all that.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's up and coming; that's a good line to be in.

M. Pratcher: Well, yeah. Well, he was in Syracuse [New York] before. First, he was in Bordentown when he worked for the state. Then he went to Syracuse. And from Syracuse, he's outside of Chicago; he's north of Chicago, yeah. He's traveled the world over in his business.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's great. Oh wonderful. Does he have a family?

M. Pratcher: No, he just has the dog and his wife. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, okay. You should have said it the other way around, his wife and a dog. [laughs]

M. Pratcher: Is that was it is? Phyllis, I agree with you. I think I was off base on that one! [laughter] Somehow or the other. But if there's anything you have in mind there that was—it was very nice of you to find interest in it. And I hope you enjoyed yourself with it because—and to tell you the truth, if I were you with some of these people, I would get all their knowledge and I would see if somebody would write a book about this.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's a very good suggestion, yes.

M. Pratcher: Believe me, first place is, we say, "What is country, and some of there." I have a notation home there, which I like there. It says, "Of the senior citizens and who made this nation what it is today." It was the farmers that came to this country. They're all senior citizens today and they built this country up to what it is today, and they are not recognized. You know, some of the things that I augmented to it where—that is true where they don't think nothing of us or Jack or whoever, that you worked so hard to make an honest living and to support yourself, where the others don't give a darn. And we're still supporting everybody as welfare. And they're talking about, well, taxes are this, taxes are that. You're the one that is causing the taxes; you're the one that's causing the taxes because you're not working and I'm paying you to live. You know once you start—

P. Boeddinghaus: It's not fair.

M. Pratcher: Do you think it is?

P. Boeddinghaus: No, I think the system got way out of whack.

M. Pratcher: Right, it's so far out of whack where your husband—I don't know how much you do—but he's got to use his brains, and his hours are never from eight to five. If his truck breaks down, he's got to find a place; he's got to find something that'll take the place of them, if he takes you to the ... [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Boeddinghaus: [recording begins mid-sentence] ... is there anything else? Now when you came here to the library on [Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's] Local History Day, you were very excited about the fact that we were showing old pictures. And you know you wanted to talk about—

M. Pratcher: Well, yeah. Well, that is the reason why—I'm glad that I know somebody that is interested in [this], you know what I mean? I've seen how horse and buggies used to go through the towns and as far as—you know people don't realize, it comes to me year after year, where you had a cow. And I'm learning lot of things where as you had a cow, and that cow was in heat. And you had to take that cow to somebody that has a bull. Many a times, I had to take the cow from Bonhamtown to Fords where somebody owned a bull. I didn't know those things, now Phyllis, until I got older and a long time after I got older, "Why am I taking that cow to a—"?

P. Boeddinghaus: To a bull. So that was your lesson in reproduction.

M. Pratcher: You understand what I'm talking about?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, yes.

M. Pratcher: Does any of the people know this? It's just like a dog that's in heat. When a dog is in heat, and be honest with you, sometimes some of the—I remember when the dog was in—what are those two dogs doing?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, yeah.

M. Pratcher: You know and the elder came out and threw a pail of cold water on them to separate them. So now people don't realize that what you had to do in those days, or what a farmer has to do today, in order to reproduce cows. Does anybody know that? Does the average—you ask any college student today—does he know why? But sometimes I learned that even if the cow is in heat, they're not—something happens and they don't reproduce. Then they have to wait another year, or I don't know how many months it is, before the cow gets in heat again.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now like you accepted that that was natural. You didn't have to read that in a book and have sexual education class?

M. Pratcher: That's right, I didn't have that. [laughs] I had to learn that from my own—

P. Boeddinghaus: Own experiences.

M. Pratcher: That's right.

P. Boeddinghaus: Dealing with the animals. It's like seeing puppies born or seeing kittens born or kids.

M. Pratcher: Right. You find out that why—how to reproduce a calf. I don't know if that is some of the things that you may be able to use, why somebody had to take the [cow] there—not everybody would have a bull because it cost a lot of money, and that bull would only serve his purposes a certain time, and certain days or certain times, and how many cows come to him.

P. Boeddinghaus: Right. So that was just part of your life, your everyday life.

M. Pratcher: That was part of a farmer's life for him.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you had to walk with the cow up to Fords?

M. Pratcher: Oh, definitely.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you'd better be careful and bring the cow back home safe.

M. Pratcher: That's right. [laughs] And not only that, Phyllis, there were no cars on the road!

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, must have been great.

M. Pratcher: No cars on the road. Listen, I went from Bonhamtown to Rocky Hill and only with a car and only passed two cars.

P. Boeddinghaus: I was going to ask you, when did you get your first car? What year? What did you get?

M. Pratcher: Well, I would say I got what they called a Jewett. A Jewett, and that was [counting] seventeen, eleven, ten, no twenty-one? Nineteen-hundred-thirty. Let's see, 1929 or something like that. Seventeen years later, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: So like did you have to take care of your own tires? You know pump them up? And fix the flat tires? So you learned to do that mechanically.

M. Pratcher: Absolutely! You had more blow-out patches than the tire! Yeah. I remember I went from Bonhamtown to Perth Amboy to the market, and I had four flat tires.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you had to fix it yourself.

M. Pratcher: That's right. So you know everybody is talking. I don't know how good this is compared to help you whatsoever. But I hope it does. If there's anything else you have, just don't be afraid to tell me.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, were you friendly with the Yelencsics family in Bonhamtown? I think they're such a great family to—they've done so much for Edison.

M. Pratcher: Well, my father—they were neighbors of ours. In fact, their father [Anthony Yelencsics] was stable boss for Bloomfields.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I never heard that before.

M. Pratcher: Believe me when I say, and Bloomfields were almost like a southern plantation.

P. Boeddinghaus: I've seen pictures of the house [formerly located along Amboy Avenue to the east of Woodbridge Avenue in Clara Barton]. It's gorgeous.

M. Pratcher: You have? Gorgeous, gorgeous, and I'm telling you, [Howard] Lundy Bloomfield and his brother [Harold R. Bloomfield], they were both Metuchenites. The grandfather [Charles A. Bloomfield] was the one that had the clay pit [Bloomfield Clay Company], made the money, and the Bloomfields squandered it away. I don't know what they did, but first places, the taxes took the place away in Raritan Township. Lundy worked in the post office. And his brother, I don't know where he lived. He lived somewhere on Spear Street, I think.

P. Boeddinghaus: Wasn't there a girl, Eleanor [Van Mater Bloomfield]?

M. Pratcher: No. I don't know if there was Eleanor. But one was a great—Lundy's wife [Patricia (Ward) Bloomfield] was a great scout, Girl Scout.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. Yeah, I remember her.

M. Pratcher: Girl Scout leader, very big in Girl Scouts. In fact, she was, I guess, president or something of some of the scouts when they had the office in Sand Hills.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I remember that. Yes.

M. Pratcher: You remember? Yeah, now their office is in East Brunswick. They've got a nice big building there. But she was number one in scouting in this part of the county. I don't know how far she went. But Lundy Bloomfield, if you saw the picture, they had—I don't know what you call it—a curved—

P. Boeddinghaus: Circular driveway?

M. Pratcher: Circular driveway.

P. Boeddinghaus: Big pillars.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, big pillars. Big mansion. Something like the mansion on—[looking at something] exactly, a little bit bigger than that. Then they had what they call a carriage house in the back. Carriage house.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. So Mr. Yelencsics was the stable manager?

M. Pratcher: Yes. And one time, [the] Yelencsices lived across the street. Not on Amboy Avenue, but on Woodbridge Avenue up the hill there for a while—I don't know

how long—because I used to visit him. And I never forget when Anna Yelencsics and I went there and the two Bloomfield boys were playing with their trains and I wanted to play with the trains. And Anna said, “Don’t you play with those trains because the boys won’t like it.” So that, I remember as a kid. But their father was stable boss and they used to have little trays—now I don’t know what kind of trays they call it—but they were dump trays. Little wagons, they were about this long [gesturing], and they filled them up with clay and they took them down to the pier. Then they pull up a rod and that would take the dump truck and tip the back end—it was on a—it wasn’t a flat truck. It was like a wagon, but one side was high and the other side was low. And when they pulled this pin out, it tipped and they wouldn’t have to unload it.

P. Boeddinghaus: An incline; [you] wouldn’t have to shovel it or anything, tip right out.

M. Pratcher: No, it fell right into the barge. But their father was—my father used to sole the shoes of all of the [Yelencsics] kids. There were eleven kids in there!

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, they were a big family. Your father was a shoemaker also?

M. Pratcher: No.

P. Boeddinghaus: No, he just had a knack for it?

M. Pratcher: He was just a good mechanic. We never went to a shoemaker. He used to sole the shoes, had his own equipment. When you have four kids and help the neighbors out, you have to struggle.

P. Boeddinghaus: There again, you were self-sufficient.

M. Pratcher: That’s what I’m talking about. I don’t know how that will fit in your—

P. Boeddinghaus: Very good. Yeah, because today you know you just go buy everything. You go to the shoemaker; you go to the dry cleaners.

M. Pratcher: That’s right, but then everybody—nobody went to the washer. I don’t know if you ever remember, they used to have a wash tub, and then they used to have—it was made out of glass and you put it in a tub and rubbed the clothes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, washboard.

M. Pratcher: Right, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Ladies would wash; washboard. Yeah, wash by hand.

M. Pratcher: Right. So Phyllis, do you have anything else—if I help you—?

P. Boeddinghaus: Very interesting. I guess you were pleased to see how the Yelencsics—you know, he did a lot for Edison. I mean there are a lot of political things now, but like he always hired the men from Edison and Bonhamtown.

M. Pratcher: Well, I’ll tell you something. He [Anthony M. Yelencsics, former Edison mayor] was good to me. He was good to a lot of people. I know that one day, I had a slight

stroke and I was in the hospital, and I was supposed to get a heart monitor. And Sherbeter [phonetic], or not Sherbet [phonetic], but somebody in the hospital says (a nurse), “You can’t have a hospital—what do you call it?—heart monitor because we don’t have any.” So I called up Boro Motors [formerly located along Route 27 near Bridge Street] and Mikey answered, “I want to talk to Tony [Yelencsics].” And Tony says, “Where are you?” I said, “The hospital.” “What are you doing there?” [chuckles] Then I tell him, I said, “I’m supposed to get a heart monitor and they’re not giving me one. They said tomorrow.” Fifteen minutes later, Sherbet [phonetic] was up there and I had a heart monitor.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, he did a lot of personal favors and personal things.

M. Pratcher: Yes. One guy was working in the post office and somebody asked me to help him there—two people. One of them was in a hospital in New York, he [Tony Yelencsics] had him transferred to here and he worked in the post office. And that one, every day the parents had—or his father and mother—had to go to New York in order—and he see that he got back here. And another one, he didn’t need the favors; I have nothing against him. How could I have anything against him because he was nice to me?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, he was always good to us too at the flower shop.

M. Pratcher: Is that right? Well, I remember I got stuck with a car, and the kid didn’t have—I said, “My car is stuck in there, and my boy [son] is coming around.” He needed a car. “Here, take mine.” You know what I mean?

P. Boeddinghaus: Very generous.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. So yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you filled me in on a lot of interesting Bonhamtown history.

M. Pratcher: Want to hear something else there?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

M. Pratcher: You know you have in mind or if something comes up in the future, please don’t be hesitating, yeah. And I hope that you have a nice there, because this part of the country is real interested because—don’t forget Ellis Island; this was the hub of America.

P. Boeddinghaus: That’s right.

M. Pratcher: Nobody was coming into San Francisco [California]. People immigrated to this country in Ellis Island. And from there, they had relatives, maybe in Cleveland [Ohio], Chicago. Yeah, you didn’t see anybody, any foreigners, go past Chicago [in] them days. Because I remember how hard it was for people to get into America years ago, say 1932 and that. Where you had to wait three or four years before your cousin could come in, and it cost you a big bundle because you had to have an agent in order for you to try to get somebody in.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you parents come through Ellis Island?

M. Pratcher: **Yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Have you been there?

M. Pratcher: **I'm going to go there, maybe this [year]. You were there?**

P. Boeddinghaus: I went. You know I waited and waited for somebody to take me, and I don't see well enough to drive myself. So the senior citizens here in Metuchen had a bus trip. I signed up for it and I got there. And it's nice. You take a little boat ride (ferryboat ride) over to the island.

M. Pratcher: **I didn't get to Ellis Island. The only one I got to with the seniors—oh, that was I guess out of Bonhamtown—to the Statue of Liberty [National Monument in New York]. I didn't get to Ellis Island yet, but something always comes up. But one of these days, I'll go.**

P. Boeddinghaus: It's interesting what's happening now too with the immigrants coming in claiming political asylum.

M. Pratcher: **And here's what I would just tell you, who takes care of them? Taxes, me, your husband, huh?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Right. They're supposed to go to their relatives. But how do they get submerged like into the population.

M. Pratcher: **You buy a car, you trade in your car, you get \$2,000 or \$3,000; then you got \$10,000 there. I bought a car a couple of years ago, I paid \$850 tax alone!**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Yes.

M. Pratcher: **You know what I mean? I could have taken a good vacation on that.**

P. Boeddinghaus: [laughs] Well you had a very interesting life and childhood, and I think that—

M. Pratcher: **Well, I had my bumps and that—all of us did, you know what I mean?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, all struggled. It was hard work

M. Pratcher: **The best thing that happened to me was that when I sold the greenhouses I had on Old Post Road, it was just before that oil crisis came because I would have been broke.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, because to heat the greenhouses, yeah.

M. Pratcher: **Oh man, I would have went broke. I would have went broke.**

P. Boeddinghaus: We had quite a few panes of glass broken in our greenhouse last week when we had the storm¹².

¹² The interviewer is referring to a massive thunderstorm on June 9, 1993 that resulted in downed trees and electrical wires throughout the Central New Jersey area.

M. Pratcher: Oh yeah?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I don't know how Jack's going to get up there and fix it. Or he'll have to hire someone. It's the highest peak of the greenhouse.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. If I were you, if you could get somebody, I would. Because last Thursday, I thought I was smart after the storm there, that one of the trees in my backyard fell on the fence. And then I cut the wrong limb and it fell right on my head. I thought—and lead—

P. Boeddinghaus: I see you have the bump up here [referring to his head], yes.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, I had to go to the emergency room because it was bleeding so much. So that's why I say—and my neighbor was going to say, he'll take care of it. Instead of him taking care of it, I was going to take care of it. So I have a nephew next door (Rose's son-in-law), and him and I cleaned this so threw everything in the—most of it is in the back of the yard there. But we got hit really bad. Spring Street got hit real, real hard.

P. Boeddinghaus: I saw that. I see the tree all bent down there. A lot of damage there.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, across the street from you people, really. Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: We were without electricity for about thirty hours.

M. Pratcher: Us too. I think it came in [the power] about three o'clock in the morning. I don't know. It was Saturday morning.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, it came back on. You know what I didn't realize that the Senior Citizens Apartments [at 35 Lincoln Avenue] were without electricity.

M. Pratcher: They were?

P. Boeddinghaus: In the units. Yeah, I don't know why. I was just remiss about remembering that because the shop was off, but then the tenants were very calm and very cooperative. The [American] Red Cross brought breakfast foods and they ordered up deli sandwiches for evening meal. They were every third light was on in the corridors, the fire alarm was working and the intercom, and they had hot water. They had a generator that kept things going, see.

M. Pratcher: Well see, that's what I was thinking about also, is all these years I had a chance to get generators for nothing. And I got enough junk around the yard, I could've there.

P. Boeddinghaus: But that was an unforeseen storm that came up. Whoever dreamed that we would get a storm like that? We lived through it, and we can't always be prepared.

M. Pratcher: Well, I hope someday Jack sells the business and retires too.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. He's worked hard. We're there forty-five years now. Yeah, a long time.

M. Pratcher: That's a long time, is right.

P. Boeddinghaus: He started very young.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, I think he was about eighteen years old.

P. Boeddinghaus: No, twenty. He was twenty. I'm so afraid he'll fall through the glass.

M. Pratcher: What's that?

P. Boeddinghaus: I'm so afraid if he gets up on top [of the greenhouse], he'll fall through.

M. Pratcher: You never can tell. You know what I mean?

P. Boeddinghaus: I know. So did you build those greenhouses on Old Post Road? Or did you buy them? Or they are existing?

M. Pratcher: No, but I built the one [Fater's Greenhouses] on [South] Main Street though. I built one big one and one small one before the [New Jersey] Turnpike—after the [New Jersey] Turnpike.

P. Boeddinghaus: And was that an old greenhouse that you reconstructed? Or did you buy everything new?

M. Pratcher: No, I bought used, all used. Yeah, I bought all used. And the pipe that I bought, Phyllis, you wouldn't believe it, but over it on Randolph Road in New Market was a Jehovah Witnesses Convention. And they had these pipes that they were using for water and all that, and then I bought all the pipe that they had.

P. Boeddinghaus: After the convention broke up?

M. Pratcher: Right. Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was very enterprising, very good.

M. Pratcher: Yeah, it was real cheap.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. They were glad for you to take it away.

M. Pratcher: Well, I bought something like fifty—[counting] one, two, four, two—about 1,000 feet of it or more (1,200 feet of pipe) and it was real reasonable. They had no use for it anyhow no more because it was used there. And it wasn't galvanized. I don't know why they used black pipe, but they used—

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember that convention place over there, yeah. The tents and different things, yeah. Well, you've been very happy living in this area, your childhood—

M. Pratcher: Hey listen, Phyllis, this is the nicest little town [Metuchen] there is.

P. Boeddinghaus: I think so too.

M. Pratcher: Believe me when I'm telling you, people knock the town and all that. Where are they going to get a town that 90 percent mind their own business? And no matter what it is, there's always a little animosity someplace or the other. But on the whole, it's a nice town.

P. Boeddinghaus: I know when Jack—if he talks about maybe retiring to Florida or something, I think I would be very homesick. I just don't answer that. I don't say anything.

M. Pratcher: No. Your mother was in Florida, wasn't she?

P. Boeddinghaus: My grandmother. And my mother went to visit her a couple of times. But they ended up living together in Pennsylvania.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. Well, I've been in Florida, I guess, four or five times. I'm not that enthused about it. There's only one section of Florida I like, and that's Naples. You know otherwise, I'm not interested. Ninety percent of it don't have no sidewalks, and to be honest, the cockroaches are nice and big.

P. Boeddinghaus: The insects, yeah. It's a huge state. Naples is on the west coast, isn't it?

M. Pratcher: Yeah. But that's another place where you can't afford. It's on a golf course. It's a beautiful town. I don't know how it is because I haven't been there in fifteen years, so I don't know if it has really built up from what I hear.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, a lot of them from this area go down there, retire, and play golf, [coughing] so on. I like Metuchen. I'm from New Brunswick originally.

M. Pratcher: Yeah. Where do you live in Brunswick?

P. Boeddinghaus: I lived a lot of different places: Lee Avenue, Reservoir Avenue, Mitchell Avenue. My family moved; we rented apartments and we moved a lot. And then when my mother worked in Raritan Arsenal, that's when we moved out to Clara Barton section, which I thought we would never get there by bus (forty-five-minute bus ride).

M. Pratcher: I remember. I think your mother worked with my sisters.

P. Boeddinghaus: Your sister Mary [Fater] especially, um-hm. They had a great time. They worked hard, but they partied and played too.

M. Pratcher: Well, what can you do? You know there were 6,000 people working in the Arsenal because I remember working in the machine shop and one colored guy brought a clock and fixed my clock. So I put the clock on the windowsill and the sun shined on it. And man, when the sunshine warmed that up there, you never saw so much bedbugs in your life!

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, oh, oh. Yeah.

M. Pratcher: You know the clock and the sunshine on that clock, it woke up all the bedbugs. I think they all hatched from the heat.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever work shift-work?

M. Pratcher: **Yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You did? Sometimes I think that's sort of injurious to your health, not to get the proper rest.

M. Pratcher: **I'm not too crazy about shift-work.**

P. Boeddinghaus: No. It's very hard on the system. But you did it. My mother did too. She worked shift-work. Those were the days.

M. Pratcher: **So Phyllis, thanks for inviting me. And I hope you could get—but think about if somebody could fill in with a lot of their—**

P. Boeddinghaus: I thought of something else at the end here. Do you remember the gypsies that used to come in the area?

M. Pratcher: **Yes.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever go to the camp or do you have any memories of the gypsy camp?

M. Pratcher: **There was a gypsy camp someplace. I don't remember where it was.**

P. Boeddinghaus: It was like between Metuchen and New Brunswick or between Metuchen and Highland Park.

M. Pratcher: **Yes, there was a gypsy camp there and they stole everything in sight.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Because I know I had another person tell me she'd take the trolley to New Brunswick and she'd see the gypsy camp out there. I could picture like around Price Club [retail warehouse], around in there.

M. Pratcher: **Yeah. Another thing is, people don't know, but there was also a racetrack in Highland Park. A racetrack with sulkies¹³, you know not trotters, on Woodbridge Avenue. And off of Woodbridge Avenue on the left-hand side, there was a park there they called Forest Park [phonetic], a recreation park. So I don't know if you could get any information out of that. But I know that my father bought one of the horses that was a racehorse. But the funny part about the horse—well, he was trained so good that he would never take a load of anything. He was strictly a racehorse where if he had the buggy behind him or just an empty wagon, he would be free. But soon as you loaded overweight, that horse would never move. Never move.**

P. Boeddinghaus: He was trained to be a racehorse.

M. Pratcher: **Right, yeah. So that's, Phyllis—**

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay [recording paused]

Thank you very much for letting me interview you, and it's been ... [recording ends]

¹³ A sulky is a light two-wheeled horse-drawn vehicle for one person, used chiefly in harness racing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]