

Dr. Myra Biggs

Date: August 9, 2004
Interviewers: Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Marie Vajo (assisted by Dr. Biggs' neighbor Duncan McDermott)
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, May 2005 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, February 2019
Editor: Jennifer Warren, September 2019

Abstract: Dr. Myra (Clouting) Biggs was an educator in the Edison school system. She received her teaching certificate at Trenton Normal School, and then her bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees from Rutgers University. Dr. Biggs was a teacher and principal in the Oak Tree, Clara Barton, Bonhamtown, and Piscataway schools for forty years, retiring in 1964. She was married to William D. Biggs, and prior to that, married to Frank B. Losey and Nelson N. Ranco. Dr. Biggs lost one son as an infant, and another, Frank Losey Jr., in 1944 in World War II. Dr. Biggs was born in 1902 in Palermo, New Jersey and died in 2004 at the age of 102.

In this interview, Dr. Biggs discusses her life as an educator and as a principal in the Edison school system, reminiscing about her experiences and touching upon some of the sexism she encountered during that time. She also talks about the Oak Tree neighborhood where she lived on the property of the abandoned one-room schoolhouse (at the northeast corner of Plainfield Road and Marion Street) from circa 1924 to 1980.

Disclaimer: Please note that all oral histories presented by the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society are unaltered. The language, comments, and thoughts contained therein are solely those of the individuals interviewed. Our goal in presenting them is to make the personal recollections of these individuals available, to be considered within both their historical context, and during the time the comments were made, as a part of the historical record. The content and language of these interviews should not in any way be attributed to any of the past, current, or future members of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society Board of Directors, or to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society membership as a whole.

P. Boeddinghaus: This oral history is done under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. This oral history takes place on Monday, August 9, 2004 with Dr. Myra Biggs at her residence in Ocean City, New Jersey—make a slight correction—Dr. Biggs actually lives in Palermo, New Jersey, and not Ocean City—slight correction.

Here we go. Marie Vajo is with me and I am Phyllis Boeddinghaus and we are going to interview Dr. Biggs. I am going to ask you where you're from—what area—are you from New Jersey, or some other state?

M. Biggs: I was born on this property [in Palermo]. This property was owned by my mother and father, but that home is over on Route 9, so I was born about a half a mile from here.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, I see. And then you were educated in this area?

M. Biggs: I went to a one-room country school here and then I went to a three-room high school in Tuckahoe. And then from there, I went to Trenton Normal School and got my teaching certificate. And then I went to Rutgers [University] and got my bachelor's, master's and doctor's degree in education up in Rutgers.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then what brought you to the Edison school system?

M. Biggs: I was teaching up there at the time—up there in 1924.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's what you had said, yes. And in Oak Tree School or did you go around to other schools?

M. Biggs: I was teaching—well, they put me everywhere. I was in Oak Tree, then they sent me to Bonhamtown, then I went to Clara Barton, then I went to Piscataway. Every place nobody else wanted, I guess.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then when did you become principal of Oak Tree School?

M. Biggs: I was acting principal. I never was principal of Oak Tree School. I was acting principal because women could not be principals. It had to be men. And then after I got my doctor's degree, I was transferred to Lincoln School because somebody else wanted Oak Tree. But they got the [unclear] bargain; they had all the buses—fifteen buses or so—and I didn't have any. So, I was in Lincoln School there for about ten years.

P. Boeddinghaus: So, we've mentioned a few people that we know and that you know and one was Ruth Eby, who taught with you.

M. Biggs: She was a first-grade teacher in Oak Tree. She was a living angel, that lady.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, she was a dear friend of mine.

M. Biggs: Wasn't she a wonderful person?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, she would talk in a very colorful and witty manner. She's recorded also. We have her oral history. As Marie [Vajo] told you, we did go to visit her in the Reformed Church Home [in Irvington] and she entertained us with her wonderful way of telling stories. And another person we know from the Oak Tree area is Walter Stochel Jr. and I believe you talked to him not too long ago.

M. Biggs: Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was Walter one of your students?

M. Biggs: No, but his wife was, in the school. Not in my classes, but I'm quite sure she attended there because she lived there.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was Louise?

M. Biggs: Louise Hollingshead.

P. Boeddinghaus: Louise Hollingshead. Yeah, that's Walter's mother.

M. Biggs: George Hollingshead was the brother. He's up in—I heard it on the radio late one night and got his number—Bryn Mawr [Pennsylvania].

P. Boeddinghaus: He's a pastor, I believe, of the Presbyterian Church, yes.

M. Biggs: Bryn Mawr.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Walter's very proud of that, yes.

M. Biggs: I was there when he [George Hollingshead] was initiated.

P. Boeddinghaus: Walter has been president of the historical society and you'd be proud of him. As a young man, he's been very active in the Edison groups.

M. Biggs: He saved that pond, didn't he?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, Oak Tree Pond. And he does a lot with the Edison Wetlands, and there's a Triple C Ranch out in Edison that's open to the public.

M. Biggs: What's that?

P. Boeddinghaus: It's called the Triple C Ranch, and that's on Tyler Road in that Russian section of Edison.

M. Vajo: Dismal Swamp.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Dismal Swamp area.

M. Biggs: Oh yeah. That's between there and South Plainfield.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. He's very active in that group and many others.

M. Biggs: Black mud. They called black wax in there. I don't know exactly what that was.

P. Boeddinghaus: So, what brings you back to your birthplace?

M. Biggs: Well, after I retired—my folks lived here, this was my family home—and I bought this land years and years and years ago. In fact, I bought it in the forties. When my father died, mother sold off some of the land and I got this, intending to retire, which I did. But my folks were here at the time. They're gone now.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. And also Marie had been talking to your friend, Jackie, up in Edison.

M. Biggs: Gedeski [phonetic]?

P. Boeddinghaus: Is that the last name, Marie?

M. Vajo: Yeah.

M. Biggs: Ben Gedeski [phonetic] and Jackie Gedeski [phonetic].

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. And then she gave us directions and she encouraged us to come and talk to you. And Walter had hoped that he would get to come down and visit you, but he's a busy guy because he works also.

And so perhaps we could now hear some interesting stories about your life as an educator?

M. Biggs: Well when I started teaching, you didn't make much compared to what they make now. I started out with \$1,200 a year, and then I dropped to \$1,160 a year when I moved to Oak Tree. And when I was principal of Oak Tree School, I got \$1,700 a year. And finally, I got up to \$5,200 after ten or twelve years.

P. Boeddinghaus: I'm sure you earned it.

M. Biggs: We spent a lot of time [unclear] and I taught during the years. I taught third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades—in all the different subjects.

M. Vajo: How many did you have in a class?

M. Biggs: The most I think I ever had at one time was about forty. And then I've had small classes. Once in Bonhamtown, I had a very small class that was one of the easiest and nicest I had. They shifted me all over.

P. Boeddinghaus: Tell us more about the Oak Tree Pond area, which was adjacent to the school.

M. Biggs: That belonged to Campbells. When it was icy, we could skate on it, so I used to take my skates to school because they wouldn't let the children out without supervision. So, I'd take my skates to school and then if the ice was strong enough, we'd go there and skate after lunch until the bell rang.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, that's wonderful.

M. Biggs: Not all the kids had skates, but a few of them brought skates to school. I took mine.

P. Boeddinghaus: I don't know if you've gotten back up to that area to see how that plot has been cleared of the beautiful big trees.

M. Biggs: Yeah, they were—walnut trees, I think. They said they brought the walnuts from Mount Vernon and planted them there. I don't know whether that's true or not.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then on the anniversary of the Revolutionary War skirmish in that area, they did have a reenactment.

M. Biggs: Yeah, but I never knew that. That just came up recently. I never knew that years ago, never heard of it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well it surfaced because they were trying to save that land from being developed into a bank and a Walgreens [pharmacy chain store], and et cetera. And there was a lot of research put into tracking down the actual history of that site. And they did come up with artifacts; they being a group who was really instrumental in saving that property, or part of it. And they came up with artifacts that there had been a skirmish around Oak Tree Pond.

M. Biggs: I never knew that. That just popped up from somewhere.

P. Boeddinghaus: So at the time, it was very interesting and Walter Stochel again was very instrumental in getting a group to reenact the battle. And the site started at the John Adams School on New Dover Road and the enactment group had their tents set up and they were in costume and they marched down to the site and reenacted the battle. And now that has been designated as a historic site.

M. Biggs: Did they have muzzle-loading rifles? [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you go to that, Marie? Did they have the actual muzzle loading and all that?

M. Vajo: Oh yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, they did. I didn't go to the—

M. Biggs: We had a gun. I think my nephew saw it when he was in my mother's house. Because we had Uncle Enoch [phonetic]—my mother's uncle—he fought in the Civil War and they had his muzzle-loading gun and also the horn.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, the powder?

M. Biggs: The powder horn to load the gun with because you muzzle loaded it. I have a ramrod, so I know they put in the powder and then the wad and then the shot and then another wad.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, the reenactment was very exciting and as true to life as they could possibly make it without being dangerous to anyone. It attracted a lot of attention. So little did you know you were in a very historic area when you were there at Oak Tree School.

Now I just want to sign off for a minute and make sure we are getting this. [recording paused]

Okay, we are getting it. And I was wondering then if you have any recall of any students of yours that perhaps became famous?

M. Biggs: Do you remember Gail Fisher?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

M. Biggs: She was an Oak Tree child; Ben Seebert [phonetic]. I lost track of them because they moved and I moved. But he went to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. I think he was studying to be a doctor. I am not sure whether he succeeded because we were out of the picture by the time he was through with that. But I'm sure a lot of them were very successful. I had about 42 percent or 43 percent black children; the others were all mixtures—many, many, many Italians because that was an Italian section. And the Quagliariello's gas station there.

P. Boeddinghaus: I knew the Quagliariellos. The sister Rose was in my class in Metuchen High School.

M. Biggs: I still hear from Rose.

P. Boeddinghaus: Do you? You know Rose?

M. Biggs: Oh yes. She was the eleventh child and the only girl.

P. Boeddinghaus: I know she was very protected by all her brothers, yes. I see her occasionally at a class reunion. Yeah, that's interesting.

M. Biggs: Her name is Miller.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Rose Miller, yes. And with the Quagliariellos, also where the bus garage was and the gas station, the town of Edison tried to condemn that area so that—

M. Biggs: They wanted to build something.

P. Boeddinghaus: Something over there instead of on the Oak Tree Pond site, but it did not go through.

M. Biggs: Good, because that's where all the kids could play. Somebody once set some traps there—muskrat traps—and I was the one that found them and threw them on the [unclear].

P. Boeddinghaus: Maybe it was my husband because he used to trap muskrat.

M. Biggs: I don't know.

P. Boeddinghaus: Can you tell us some other interesting stories from your teaching career. Something you think of?

M. Biggs: I can't think of any particular. Most all of them that were interesting were youngsters, followed them through. We had, as I said, a large percentage of black children.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did they come in from Potters?

M. Biggs: Um-hm. And there was no conflict between the white and the black—they played together, friends together. Two of them I remember used to sing duets together. And Gail Fisher was the one, of course, who finally ended up out in Hollywood [California]. One year, one of the black boys was a valedictorian. He had the highest grades. So, there were no difference in their achievements; a lot of difference in the way some of them had to live though.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. But it shows when they are determined to learn, they will do so.

M. Biggs: In fact, there were some youngsters that were very glad to get to school because some of them—and I didn't give homework—I think five hours, twenty hours a week is enough work for a kid. And to give homework to some of those kids down there in Potters, where they didn't have maybe not even a decent table and a little light hanging that you [unclear] could only see with—you don't give kids homework anyway, not that age. When they get that in high school, it's different. It's the best way to teach kids to cheat that I ever knew.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's interesting.

M. Biggs: I remember when some of them gave homework. They'd be out in the morning, one would do the arithmetic homework, the other do the other. The next morning, they'd copy each other's work. They shared it.

P. Boeddinghaus: And they never thought you would catch on.

M. Biggs: Well it wasn't mine. I didn't give the homework.

P. Boeddinghaus: No, that's what you said, yeah. That's interesting. By the way—

M. Biggs: If a child can't get his work done in the twenty hours or more he's in school, he's ahead of himself. And they have other things to do, I think, in life—the children. They learn to play piano, they play games, they do other things. Their whole life isn't in school.

P. Boeddinghaus: By the way, I want to interject this, that Audrey Dana sends you regards. Now she had children that went to Oak Tree School. And I believe she lived on Park Avenue in that big mansion.

M. Biggs: Dana?

P. Boeddinghaus: Dana, the Williams estate.

M. Biggs: Oh yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Marie was talking to her and said we were coming to visit you. And she sends regards.

M. Biggs: Same back to her.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. She's active in the historical society and she's provided a lot of interesting photos to our collection, of that big house.

M. Biggs: I've lost track, now let me know when Mrs. Eby died. I remember once I was sitting at my desk and Mrs. Eby came in, sat down beside me, and she dropped a string of beads, they were—

P. Boeddinghaus: Some kind of pearls?

M. Biggs: No, they're not pearls.

M. Vajo: Seashells?

M. Biggs: I'll think of them. She dropped them around my neck, gave me a kiss. She said, "Here's a bead for every time you stood by me when I needed you." And then finally, when I knew she had grandchildren, I mailed them back to her for her grandchildren, because I have no one to give them to. They were beautiful. Amber! Amber beads.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh amber, yes. She had a very interesting life, yes.

M. Biggs: **Beautiful amber beads. They were smoky, and I think they're amber—beautiful beads. She'd buy stuff for the kids. She'd buy stuff for the animals.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, yes. She loved her animals. I think that she fed them better than she fed herself. They came first. She lived in a little house on [24] Rector Street in Metuchen and she was a very smart lady. Because I remember that she got a beautiful—

M. Biggs: **Very smart. Her daughter was a beautiful pianist—Pat [Patricia].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Pat, yes. She [Ruthy Eby] got a reverse mortgage on her home, so she could stay in that house on Rector Street. Yes, her girls were very talented, but she had a lot of sorrow in her life also—misfortune about her husband, and so forth.

M. Biggs: **I don't know what happened to him.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. But Marie and I went up to the Reformed Church Home to visit her and she loved seeing us and regaled us with stories and she helped us identify some photos from our archives. And getting back to what you said originally, she passed away probably about five years ago, around this time in the summer, and there was just a memorial service at the Reformed Church.

M. Biggs: **I think she reached a hundred, didn't she?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, at least a hundred or 101. Yes. And when we went to visit her in the Reformed Church Home, she said to us that the home was going to build in Old Bridge and she was looking forward then to transferring from Irvington to Old Bridge. And like we pooh-poohed it and said, "Oh yeah, well—you know." But it was true; it was true. They did rebuild in Old Bridge, but she never got to transfer.

M. Biggs: **She was a very talented person. A very thoughtful person.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes—very unique.

M. Biggs: **Yes, she was unique. She's the only person I know that would take her blanket off her bed and take it out and give it to her dog in the yard. [laughter]**

P. Boeddinghaus: Remember she used to ride around in her car? I don't know how many dogs and cats she had on the back seat.

M. Biggs: **On some such occasions she'd buy and give it to the dogs, and she didn't have any.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Have you ever met anyone else that was so unique? Was there anyone else in your career of education?

M. Biggs: **She really liked the children; she was really good to them. And when she didn't have much money, she'd go buy books and tear out the pictures and give them to the kids to color—little teacher booklets for the kids. She'd do that, and very few people did that. I think she at least could afford it.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. Is there any other, like, activities, in the—?

M. Biggs: I have a little book that she wrote somewhere back then. She wrote about the history of her life to some extent.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, I believe I have that. She wrote prolifically, and I saved all of her letters and then at one point someone typed them up for me and we have her memoirs.

M. Biggs: Her brother [Edward Allen Burroughs Jr.] was a pharmacist there in Metuchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, and then she had a sister [Elsie (Burroughs) Potter] that lived in Metuchen also.

M. Biggs: I didn't know her sister.

P. Boeddinghaus: So, is there something outstanding that you can think of that—during your teaching career?

M. Biggs: Not particularly, because every day was a challenge with somebody, something special every day.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. About any of the other staff that you worked with?

M. Biggs: I had a very good staff there in Oak Tree. I had Gina Faas [phonetic], who was one of the teachers. There was a whole bunch. Murphy was a teacher there—Frank Murphy.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I remember Frank Murphy, yes.

M. Biggs: And then for a while, we had a split session. And I was principal of the [Oak Tree] school at the time, but I used to get the checks to pay the teachers there and I'd give them. I discovered that Murphy made more than I did—he was a man.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, yes. How did you feel about that?

M. Biggs: Well, I knew it was unfair, but he had six kids to feed so—

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, he had a big family.

M. Biggs: He didn't make much. But when we were on split session, he only worked a half a day—because then it was the morning and afternoon because we had to do it that way—so then he could work in the Metuchen Hardware in the afternoon.

P. Boeddinghaus: And why did they have to have split sessions? Because they had so many children?

M. Biggs: Before they got the addition done, yes. When I first started to teach there, there were only about 600 pupils in the whole township, Raritan Township it was then. Miss Purcell had the Menlo Park one-room school there. I didn't know her, but she taught.

P. Boeddinghaus: Where was that located—the Menlo Park School?

M. Biggs: I'm not sure. I think somewhere near the light, but I'm not sure.

P. Boeddinghaus: We have a picture in the archives of that schoolhouse.

M. Biggs: Then I get the children because she only had so many grades, I guess. She's [Miss Purcell] a good teacher. She had bright, very well-educated kids that I got. Then they put the annex in Oak Tree [School]. We had an auditorium when we first moved into Oak Tree; it had six classrooms: four downstairs, two upstairs and an auditorium between them, instead of the other two classrooms. Then they finally divided the auditorium into two and then we had eight classrooms. Then they put on the annex and then we had eight, and finally they added to the school. We had buses for a while.

P. Boeddinghaus: They came from the outlying sections into the school. And did the kids bring their own lunches, or was there a cafeteria?

M. Biggs: No cafeteria. For a while a lady came; Mrs. Reeder [phonetic] would come up with some soup if some kids wanted to buy a bowl of soup for very cheap. But other than that, there was no cafeteria. And we always had, during the poor years, if there were children that didn't have lunch, people would always—they'd bring extra sandwiches and share them so nobody ever went without eating.

P. Boeddinghaus: And was there a milk program? Some of the kids would get milk?

M. Biggs: Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Don't you remember having to bring in money for milk? Or it was subsidized?

M. Biggs: Yes. It used to be in a little bottle—and finally in little containers that were disposable—from Wood Brook.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, tell me more about Wood Brook Farms.

M. Biggs: That was where they had the milk, you know. Wood Brook had milk, cows. And they had to certify milk there. The certified milk didn't have to be pasteurized.

D. McDermott: Bill [William D. Biggs, her husband] used to work there, right?

M. Biggs: He delivered milk, early in the morning. He started out three or four o'clock in the morning. He had to get the milk there for people's breakfast.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was it delivered by horse-drawn wagon?

M. Biggs: For a while, but most of the farmers had a truck. My husband had a horse and he said he [the horse] was so brilliant; he [the horse] knew every stop. While he was delivering, the horse would go to the next stop and he'd walk up because he didn't get out for fifty feet or twenty-five feet to the next house—but the horse knew them all. [laughs] He'd stop—he'd go ahead and wait. It's amazing what animals know.

P. Boeddinghaus: You know now that Wood Brook Farms area is housing; there's homes in there.

M. Biggs: That was a big, mushy place—they called black wax. It was like a swampy place also. They called it black wax, black clay—between there and South Plainfield. I don't know how they could build there. Maybe they didn't.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well possibly they filled in or whatever, but there's a big housing development in there now and it's called Wood Brook Farms. And there are some villas. I have a friend that lives in one of the villas.

Well then did you know the Hale family?

M. Biggs: I didn't really know them well. I knew of them, yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Not too long ago, Dick Hale [Richard M. Hale] passed away and he always spoke about living on the farm.

M. Biggs: Yeah, he owned it. I think he owned it. He was the manager, whether he owned it or not.

P. Boeddinghaus: His dad owned it.

M. Biggs: He was also a freeholder or something. I think he had another job.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. That was his dad [W. Robert Hale] and his dad was mayor of Edison at one time. And there were other Hale boys. I think they ended up going to Rutgers Prep [School in Franklin Township] and Rutgers. But Dick Hale was very prominent in Edison.

M. Biggs: Yeah, they had that big farm or house over there somewhere. I never saw their house. There weren't very many people in all of Raritan Township at that time, and then it started to build up.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, it did.

M. Biggs: I taught—first I was in Oak Tree School, then I think next was Clara Barton, then Bonhamtown, then Piscataway. I guess that was it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever hear how Lindenau got its name, which was in that Piscatawaytown area?

M. Biggs: Lindenau?

P. Boeddinghaus: Lindenau. That's always a mystery. We're always trying to find out how Lindenau got its name.

M. Biggs: There was a person by the name of Lindenau—he's a bridge builder. I think he built the Brooklyn Bridge¹.

P. Boeddinghaus: I think that was [Gustav] Lindenthal. Yeah, that always remains a mystery, how Lindenau got its name and that's where—

M. Biggs: I thought he [Gustav Lindenthal] came down from Maine, but I don't know.

P. Boeddinghaus: Is that the area where you live, Marie? Is that considered Lindenau?

¹ Gustav Lindenthal, who lived in the Metuchen-Edison area, designed the Hells Gate Bridge in New York City.

M. Vajo: Close to it, yeah.

M. Biggs: **Somebody said they [the Lindenthal family] came down from Maine, I don't know. They said there so many rocks where they lived before, that they had to sharpen the sheep's noses so they could feed! [laughter] So, they came down to New Jersey.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Marie, do you have any other questions or comments, for Dr. Biggs?

M. Vajo: What are some of the stores, and so on, up there in the Oak Tree section when you were there?

M. Biggs: **There was one down by the [coughs]—a little country store sold all kinds of stuff down near the railroad track, where the firehouse—you know, the firehouse. When you went down, it was on the right side of the road as you are going towards South Plainfield—had a little store there. And other than that, I don't think there was any store.**

M. Vajo: Where'd you go, to Metuchen?

M. Biggs: **Metuchen or Plainfield. Usually Metuchen, that was a little easier.**

D. McDermott: Touch Mealey's [phonetic]? Wasn't there a big restaurant there, right across from you?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that was on the corner.

M. Biggs: **He had a tavern. I don't think it was a restaurant. There was somebody eventually that had a little snack bar there; you went to get a hamburger or something. I don't know who owned that; that one burned down. I think the insurance got hot because the person who owned it was so concerned, he said "Is this all that burned?" [laughter] So I think somebody set it on fire, but it wasn't very flammable. He came there and said, "Is this all that burned?" [laughs]**

M. Vajo: Was there many farms around there? Or was it starting to build up?

M. Biggs: **Not much. There were some of the farms, down there. But there were—they had their own gardens and stuff down Grove Avenue. They were, as I said, mostly Italian people. Snyder had a farm down there, the one down on New Dover Road, the one that cut through to Potters. Snyder had a big farm there. And he used to come pick up the Quagliariello kids. He used to work two jobs, school and then go home, change the clothes, and go out and work on the farm. But other than that, there wasn't too much. Lindenthal, they owned my house all the way down that—he owned that whole property—that one who was the engineer.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I had heard that.

M. Biggs: **And then finally, someone sold and they built the house on that corner. Hudson had it—**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, that's developed tremendously. I remember the Hudsons. Yes. I went to school with Jim Hudson. And I know the woman whose family worked for Lindenthal—

M. Biggs: Jim was such a—

P. Boeddinghaus: Jim Hudson.

M. Biggs: Jim, he was such a nice kid. But he was killed, wasn't he, in a car?

P. Boeddinghaus: I think so. Yeah.

M. Biggs: Coming home from a wedding or something. I guess they were drinking. I guess they were drunk. They were both killed, ran off the road drunk, I guess.

P. Boeddinghaus: I think the name I'm trying to think of is Schnebby [phonetic]. The Schnebbys [phonetic] worked for Lindenthal in that—they did the housekeeping, and they kept the grounds. And I would like to interview that woman—

M. Biggs: They're not the ones I remember. The ones I remember were the—they lived on the property—cheated their landlords—

P. Boeddinghaus: The woman I know is Helen. And it was her parents that worked on the estate.

M. Biggs: He was a stone mason. He's the one who helped build the church in Metuchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: St. Francis [of Assisi Cathedral]?

M. Biggs: [Albert] Bruderer.

P. Boeddinghaus: You're right, you're right. Cross out Schnebby [phonetic]. Bruderer. You are correct. That was it, yes.

I'd love to interview Helen and have her tell me about working on that estate. Yeah, and she told me she used to play on the Metuchen Country Club grounds. She would go sleigh riding, and help her parents do cleaning and yardwork and so forth. But she's moved to Florida. Was Dr. [Joseph] Kreskey ever a pupil of yours?

M. Biggs: I didn't have him in my room, but yes. He and my son were great friends. You mean Joe Kreskey?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. He passed away not too long ago.

M. Biggs: Yes, I was talking to his sister.

P. Boeddinghaus: His sister Margaret.

M. Biggs: Yes. She's remarried now.

P. Boeddinghaus: I know Margaret. Yeah, I picked up on that in the class reunion list because I wanted to send a sympathy card at that time.

M. Biggs: I think Joe was seventy-three, they said. Not very old.

P. Boeddinghaus: No. And he was superintendent of schools in Edison for a while.

M. Vajo: Did you ever teach in a one-room schoolhouse?

M. Biggs: **No. I attended one, but I never slept in one–slept in one?–taught in one. [laughter] No, slept in one, I used to stay in eight hours all night.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Sure.

M. Biggs: **This is a one-room school I went to in Palermo [referring to a picture]. We got a very good education, believe me. We had a kid come in from–I think, it’s Philadelphia or something. I think his name was Wonderlake [phonetic]. And he made fun of our school [unclear]. The first test we took, I think he got 32 [percent], everybody else passed. We were delighted because he made fun of us. [laughter] He wasn’t anywhere near up to us. And we called her Aunt Sally; she was [unclear] young, she always [unclear] called Aunt Sally. And a one-room country school is the most effective teaching because if you’re up there–we have the recitation bench up here–and if you were in fifth grade and she had the fourth grade class up there, she’d say, “You come up here,” and you’d go up there and do this all over–the fourth grade work that you weren’t so good in the year before–or you’d sit there and listen. And she used to do all of the arithmetic problems. If we needed help or couldn’t solve a problem or something, she said we could come get the paper and look at it. She said, “Cheat if you want to, but the only one you can cheat is yourself.” [laughs]**

P. Boeddinghaus: That was a good philosophy.

M. Biggs: **We’d sit back with the stove and work together, so we could do that if we wanted to–help each other.**

P. Boeddinghaus: The one-room schoolhouse [Old Franklin Schoolhouse] in Metuchen is still active with the women’s club [Borough Improvement League].

M. Biggs: **I didn’t know where that was. I don’t know where it was.**

P. Boeddinghaus: If you could picture between the Metuchen Firehouse and the Masonic Temple [Mount Zion Lodge No. 135], with the one-room schoolhouse in Metuchen. Built in 1805, it will soon be 200 years old. And it’s been restored. And I’ve given tours to youngsters from Campbell School and they wanted to know where the teacher sat and where was the cafeteria. [laughter] And it’s been restored and it’s in pretty good shape after 200 years, but of course we have to work on it.

M. Biggs: **We went from nine till nine and then we had fifteen-minute recess if anyone wanted. And then we had an hour lunch, because some brought their lunch and some went home–I was only less than a third of a mile, so I don’t know–then we’d go back and get out at four o’clock.**

P. Boeddinghaus: That was a long day.

M. Biggs: **That was a long day.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So, do you still keep in touch with the people up in Edison area?

- M. Biggs:** Some of them, but not too many of them are around anymore that I know.
- M. Vajo: At the Oak Tree School, you had recess. What did you do at recess?
- M. Biggs:** Went out and played.
- M. Vajo: You didn't have a playground?
- M. Biggs:** Yeah, but we had an acre or so, I think, that we could play in. You could go out and play because you had a chance to go to the bathroom, go out to the pump and get a drink, and go back in, the bell would ring. You use handbells.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, you have it?
- M. Biggs:** No, I don't have that [unclear]
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. Oh, nothing electronic.
- M. Biggs:** No, but we had fire drills when I was there in Oak Tree. Once, when I needed—the fire was in the meters—something damaged the electric meter down there. If I needed to ring the bell for a fire drill, there wouldn't have been any. So that ended that, so then I always used a handbell.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Much more effective.
- M. Biggs:** It doesn't break down anyway.
- P. Boeddinghaus: That's right. There's so much technology today.
- M. Vajo: Did you have much discipline problems in school?
- M. Biggs:** The kids?
- M. Vajo: Yeah.
- D. McDermott: What about your replacement, when you left Oak Tree School. Do you have a little sentiment towards—you were replaced by a man, right?
- M. Biggs:** They said they were going to put a man in Oak Tree School because he knew how to handle the niggers. It's what John Anderson told me. So, he wasn't there very long. He came to the principal's meeting with a broken wrist. He was pushing a colored kid around, I guess. And the kid, they said, picked up a toilet plunger and hit him, broke his wrist. So, he knew how to handle them. [laughs] I don't know what he was doing to them. You talk to kids, you reason with kids, you don't need problem with them. And if they're having problems, you find out why. Kids don't just misbehave because they want to be. Some of them have pretty miserable homes. You ask them, "What's the matter?"
- P. Boeddinghaus: So, it sounds like you were more tolerant.
- M. Biggs:** Well, you find out why the kid is doing what he's doing. I mean, it isn't like a doctor—you give every person the same medicine. One kid misbehaves for one

reason. Some of them misbehave just because they want attention. I had one like that—Tirpak was his name. And I said to the teacher—his father was in the service somewhere. His mother was a drinker I guess, because when I went to the house there was an empty—the liquor people was—a box full of empty whisky bottles. And she told me she burned his hand to punish him. So a kid like this wants some attention. So, you find out what they want, and you pay attention to them. And I said to him once—he was misbehaving—I said, “If you misbehave, I’m not going to talk to you.” But I said, “If you just want to visit, I’ll stop whatever I’m doing and talk to you,” which I did. And that’s all he wanted was attention.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, someone to listen to him.

M. Biggs: Kid will not be ignored. I had a mother come in once, she was talking about her boy, he was a perfect child in school. She said—but I didn’t know why she was complaining about [unclear]—finally I said, “What he wants is you. Pay attention to him.”

P. Boeddinghaus: As simple as that.

M. Biggs: They’re going to get your attention. Some of these kids were off, the little ones off at eight o’clock in the morning to their mom and dad’s nursery place and then back. They really didn’t have a home time, they got back from that nursery school, it was time to have their supper and go to bed. They didn’t hardly know the family because they were out all day, and they’re scarcely home when the parents were there.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then let’s see, did you teach during wartime?

M. Biggs: I started teaching in 1924.

P. Boeddinghaus: Twenty-four. And then into the early forties, the war started

M. Vajo: What year did you retire?

M. Biggs: Sixty-four.

M. Vajo: Sixty-four.

M. Biggs: About forty-two years.

P. Boeddinghaus: Forty-seven years, yeah.

M. Vajo: Was it any different during wartime with so many people away, and so on? Were the kids any different?

M. Biggs: I didn’t notice particularly.

P. Boeddinghaus: So since you’ve retired, what have you been doing and how have you been filling your time?

M. Biggs: We have a place up in Maine, so we spent the summer up in Maine. And then we traveled around the country. I mean, with a tent—sometimes we’d keep out on the

ground, in parks, and get in all the pretty places throughout the country. I've been in ... [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

D. McDermott: [browsing through Dr. Biggs' old photographs] This is where Myra used to live. I don't know—that was like, it used to be a one-room schoolhouse?

M. Vajo: Yeah.

D. McDermott: So, this is probably where that [Oak Tree Pond] park is.

M. Vajo: Yeah.

D. McDermott: I think Campbell, you said, used to live there?

M. Biggs: He lived on the other side, but he owned the ground.

D. McDermott: I don't know. I'm not familiar with that house, myself.

M. Vajo: Do you know what house that is, in the background?

D. McDermott: This is Oak Tree School. I guess you recognize that.

M. Vajo: Yeah, I saw that. That's great.

D. McDermott: That's the graduating class, I guess. That's the same house again. That's Myra's garage, and that kind of looks over the park.

M. Vajo: Right

D. McDermott: Before it was a park.

M. Vajo: Yeah.

M. Biggs: I can't tell who that is. I see something there—

P. Boeddinghaus: Would you like to use my magnifying glass?

M. Biggs: I've got macular degeneration in this eye, and I don't see with this eye.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I have macular degeneration also.

M. Biggs: And I've got 20/40 in this one, so I see about one-quarter of what I should see.

D. McDermott: This might help. Is this her garage? That might give her a reference point.

M. Vajo: Yes, here's—

M. Biggs: I try to see who this is, but I can't see it.

D. McDermott: I think that's your mother.

M. Vajo: Yes, it's her mother

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay. Here's a picture of your mother.

M. Vajo: And the house next to your garage—in the background of your garage there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Is this a big snowstorm?

M. Biggs: Yeah.

D. McDermott: Another of Gypsy? Is that your dog, Gypsy?

M. Biggs: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: We're looking at some old photographs from where Myra lived in Edison, and of her home, and of her mother, and her dog.

M. Biggs: She was Gill's dog. Oh, what a beautiful snow.

P. Boeddinghaus: Isn't that beautiful?

D. McDermott: Do you recognize the house beyond the garage there?

M. Biggs: No, I can't see it well. I see so poorly; I can't see it.

M. Vajo: It's okay. You lived in the one-room schoolhouse [in Oak Tree]. How did you get that?

M. Biggs: Well, Campbells—they had—the property was—well, what they didn't use, I think they had permitted them to build the school on the property, but they didn't own the property. If the school was abandoned, it reverted to them [the Campbells]. So that's who it belonged to. And they said that was started by a traveling minister [Bethune Dunkin], or a traveling somebody that came through and started the school. And there was a great big tree out there, and they named it "Oak Tree." A big tree on the corner.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then how did you—how were you able to live in that building?

M. Biggs: Well, we bought it from the Campbell people. Their relatives.

P. Boeddinghaus: They were a relative of yours?

M. Biggs: No, the Campbells.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I see. And how long did you live there?

M. Biggs: I lived there about sixty years. I moved there in [19]24 and came back in [19]61.

P. Boeddinghaus: So the time that you were teaching at Oak Tree School, that was very convenient? Did you walk to school?

M. Biggs: No, but I was in different schools at the time.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. And did you drive?

M. Biggs: I did, for a while. But for a long time, I didn't have a car. I couldn't afford a car.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then how would you get from schoolhouse to schoolhouse?

M. Biggs: Buses.

P. Boeddinghaus: By bus?

M. Biggs: And then for a while, the secretary took me because she worked in the same school as I did. [unclear] in silence.

P. Boeddinghaus: Silence.

M. Biggs: When I went there, I got 1,100 and some dollars a year.

D. McDermott: I don't know why, I just get the feeling that they were mean to Myra. Because it was—it would have been so convenient, if she lived so close to Oak Tree School, but they sent her to other schools for some reason.

P. Boeddinghaus: Transferred her.

D. McDermott: I don't think Myra was very agreeable to some of their policies, and she—

M. Biggs: Battaglia [phonetic] came there. And they wanted to give him Oak Tree School. So then I went to Bonhamtown, but I got the better deal. I had to commute, but he's the one that had the thirteen buses. And one bus—Gurlison [phonetic] tried to fool somebody. He transported the children to the—there's no manual training shop in the other schools, so they took them to Piscataway where the boys—people got manual training—woodwork, I think, like manual training. So then, back when he got that done, he'd bring my kids early in the morning and then take them the same transport bus so then I'd get a bunch of kids sometimes a quarter after eight or so, because he'd bring them to me and then he'd take them to Piscataway. He could have taken them later, because—so I had the early kids, so he had to—well I was always there early because they're eight to six, usually every day eight to six.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then the Quagliariellos, they had a bus service also. You say it different than I do. How do you say it again?

M. Biggs: They called it "Cor-relli."

P. Boeddinghaus: "Cor-relli," yeah.

M. Biggs: Q-u-a-g-l-i-a-r-i-e-l-l-o

P. Boeddinghaus: You got it; that's right. And I say "Qua-gri-ellio." [laughter] He was in the bus, school bus business for a while too. And had his bus garage across from where you lived.

M. Biggs: He pulled a dirty trick on us one time. We never had anyone that came out here [crosstalk]. The teachers would have their—they'd take the kids out to the end-of-the-year lunch picnic time. And one of the teachers—I didn't decide this bus they hired to take their class, I didn't care. Well anyway, one of the teachers hired another bus company to take their children on a trip. Well, Quagliariello came to me. And one of my teachers was a Mrs. McCauley [phonetic], fourth-grade teacher, was taking her kids out for their end-of-the-year picnic. And he came, and she came up to my office crying. She said, "Quagliariello says he won't—." They were all ready, dressed, lunches and everything. He waited till the last minute, and then came in and said, "We're not going to take them because one of the teachers had hired another bus company." Well, she was crying. So I called one of the other bus companies. I told them what happened. He said, "I'll be there in a little while and there'll be no charge." So they got the picnic for nothing, but we never hired him [Quagliariello] again.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was too bad. I think that was a poor judgement on his part.

M. Biggs: As if he owned the place, as if nobody else could hire anybody but him. And some of them had to, because he did not have license for inter-state travel—the ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission], you know, that license. Some of the bus companies could take you to New York to the zoo, or whatever you wanted—the park, or whatever. But he couldn't, he wasn't licensed for that. And nevertheless, we're supposed to hire him, I guess, and walk over the river. Well that ended his business.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's too bad, because he was right there—a stone's throw.

M. Vajo: What do you—I mean, what kind of memories do you have of that Oak Tree area years ago. It was a dirt road, right? Oak Tree Road?

M. Biggs: Well, when I moved there, Oak Tree Road came this way, this way, and this way. It didn't go behind my house. And when they increased the speed limit, they said they couldn't have those two right angle curves. So they cut the road behind my house, and I lived on a wedge.

M. Vajo: Right. Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: I can picture it.

M. Biggs: And that's when I was able to buy the piece of land between that new road [Marion Street] and my property, because Campbell didn't want to sell it as long as it joined his property. But then when they cut it up and his property by the road, then I was able to get that piece of land. It wasn't cheap. I think I paid \$3,000 for it, but they were talking about putting up a hot dog stand or something on the corner. That'd been right behind my house because I didn't own much behind my house at the time.

P. Boeddinghaus: You have a wonderful memory for facts and figures, like your salary and what you paid for the property and—that's terrific.

- M. Biggs:** Well, I can remember stuff, I can remember [unclear].
- M. Vajo: Do you remember anything exciting that went on in that area?
- M. Biggs:** There wasn't much going on.
- M. Vajo: Or just a regular run-of-the-mill, everyday—
- M. Biggs:** Little farming, but there was nothing going on there.
- D. McDermott: You said there's a big meteor that lit up the night one time in a big explosion?
- M. Biggs:** That's what I think it was; I never knew what it was about. I think it must have been a meteor. Just about midnight, I saw the whole world lit up, and this terrible noise, and that was it. And I think a meteorite fell between Oak Tree and South Plainfield. But it probably went right down that black mud, they called it there. It probably went right in the ground, probably nobody ever found it, or saw it. But who knows what it was, but it was a terrible, very loud noise, and a very bright light, just about midnight.
- M. Vajo: When was this?
- M. Biggs:** I don't remember what year. A long, long, long time ago.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever have any association with Thomas A. Edison?
- M. Biggs:** No.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Or with his children? I'm trying to correlate the dates that you mentioned, when he was in Menlo Park.
- M. Biggs:** No, I don't think he was in Menlo Park when I was there because he went back quite a long ways. And I wanted to go when he lit the light down in Menlo Park [for the fiftieth anniversary], but I was alone that night with my baby, and they were doing that at midnight, so I wouldn't take—get the baby up at night and take him around. So, I didn't go to see it, but that's when he lit the light. It was supposed to be a replica of the first light.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Did you have more than one child? You mentioned your son.
- M. Biggs:** I had two. I lost them both.
- P. Boeddinghaus: I'm sorry.
- M. Biggs:** I don't—of course my first [Frank Losey Jr.] was born in [19]25. And then FDR [President Franklin D. Roosevelt] decided that the people who weren't old enough to vote had to fight the war, so he was drafted. He got out of high school at fifteen, he was in his third year of college at eighteen, was drafted and never came home. I got a silver star, because he went out on a minefield to bring somebody in—and they were both killed. And then the other one—I have no idea what happened to that child. He just got sick. I think the doctor did the wrong

thing. I think he had kidney failure, I think that's why. I don't know. He probably thought he had colic and wanted the doctor to close him up. So he was two months old when he died. So I have no children, no grandchildren. And everybody else is gone; I was the youngest of four.

P. Boeddinghaus: Is Duncan [McDermott] related to you? The young man that is here?

M. Biggs: No. His mother bought my house up in Oak Tree, and then she moved down here. And then when she came down, she came about every Tuesday and had lunch, sometimes we'd play a game of cards or something. Then she moved to Florida, and he came here.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, you're very comfortable here, in your home.

M. Biggs: Yeah, back away from the road.

P. Boeddinghaus: It's very quiet. You're off the main street.

M. Biggs: Yeah. In this house, there's everything downstairs. It has a full bath downstairs, the laundry's downstairs. I drew the plan for the house myself.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you?

M. Biggs: Well, I found so many houses—I was in one house that they'd rebuilt, I couldn't [unclear] that was Andrew Crossen's [phonetic] house. Before I bought this, I thought that next door house—that next house was called "Sweetheart"—the next house was for sale, and it was a very nice house when Andrew Crossen [phonetic] had it. Well, I went over there to look at the house, and there was more land—it was very nice—and a big barn. But I went over, and I went in, and where there had been a great big kitchen with a great big cook-stove, they had like a recreation room and a fireplace there. So then I go around. Finally I said, "Where's the kitchen?" "Oh," they said, "the kitchen?" I said, "Yes." Where do you suppose they put the kitchen?

P. Boeddinghaus: In the basement?

M. Biggs: Even worse.

P. Boeddinghaus: In the barn? [laughs]

M. Biggs: There was a twin parlor at the time. They had the spare kitchen and they had like a dining room next. And then when you came in the front door, the stairway went up like this. And I went—they went around, and I said, "Where's-?" They put the kitchen under the stairway! It was about as wide as the stairway, and of course, it was sloping like this. If you opened the door on this side, you had to close the one on this side. There wasn't room for anything of any size—a refrigerator or anything; no size. That was the kitchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: I would think it would be dark. Under the stairs, it would be dark.

D. McDermott: I heard lived here for twenty-five dollars an acre right, Myra?

M. Biggs: **Here?**

D. McDermott: Yeah, at that point.

M. Biggs: **In the forties.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So you decided against that house. But I'm sure then you got ideas of what you would really like to have.

M. Biggs: **Then I bought—after my father died, my mother sold some of the land. And I was the youngest, so my sisters had first choice. I didn't care; I didn't. I just wanted the land, I didn't want to use it, that was back in the forties. I moved down here in [19]80. The land that mother and dad owned was a piece on this side, it was 1.8 acres. Then my sister bought this—between this road and [Route] 9—that was about eight acres. The other side, my nephew got, I think. So I bought this after.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And then you designed your own home? Did you have an architect help you?

M. Biggs: **Of course, I had to have it drawn up eventually, but I drew it first. The thing that everybody likes about this house—I have seventeen closets.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Wow. That's very good.

M. Vajo: And they're all full. [laughs]

M. Biggs: **Yes. But some of these houses, they have almost no closets and no space for storing anything. I have five bedrooms, and everyone has a shelf closet and a hanging closet, you know, a walk-in. And then I have a closet when you come in from the porch, and I have one in the laundry. I have them all over the place. And there's one in the vestibule.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Excellent. You had a lot of forethought.

M. Biggs: **Well usually people who design houses who never cooked a meal or cleaned the house. I looked at these designs—you know you get these designs of houses—you'd know nobody worked in one.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You had more of a practical idea of what it should be, and they could put that into play.

M. Biggs: **Yeah. They'd have a recreation room and a bar [unclear] this room, and then you cut out a [unclear] number of closets under the stair step. [laughter]**

P. Boeddinghaus: So then I believe now that the Oak Tree School is a part of the JFK [John F. Kennedy] Hospital.

M. Biggs: **I understand that.**

P. Boeddinghaus: They utilize the space for various reasons. And then there's been Hartwyk at Oak Tree built behind the school. It's a way of a—a nursing home or a rehab situation. And they have a daycare respite for some people who need to be taken care of during the day, and then their family would pick them up.

- M. Biggs:** **Apparently, they sold for almost not some little schools—and then they built, I don't know if I've been to the new ones, but I think some of the old schools were just as good or better than the new ones. I don't know. I haven't seen them.**
- P. Boeddinghaus: That was one thing in Metuchen, that they just demolished the old Franklin School, which had been the high school. And in hindsight, you think that could have been the Borough Hall or could have been senior housing. But it was demolished and townhouse-type dwellings have been put in there. You know where I mean, on Route 27?
- M. Vajo: Middlesex Avenue.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, where the old Franklin School used to be.
- D. McDermott: They tore that down?
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that's torn down.
- M. Vajo: They also tore Borough Hall—
- M. Biggs:** **You wonder why they do that. That could have been made into apartments or something. [crosstalk]**
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, it could have, for seniors.
- M. Biggs:** **I think Clara Barton [School] was.**
- P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, and that is lovely up there. Clara Barton, the main building has been made into offices. And then an annex out the back—which is senior housing, assisted living—and it is just beautiful. I've delivered Meals on Wheels there to some clients.
- M. Biggs:** **Clara Barton, you had like a balcony all around. And did they pour that over? Because the gym was two stories high. Around the edge was one story high where you could sit and watch games and stuff, in the balcony.**
- P. Boeddinghaus: See, I never went into Clara Barton School. A couple of my sisters—I'm the oldest of four—did attend there. I being the oldest, I never got to go in. And I don't know if you remember the name John Gulya. He's the one that remodeled the schoolhouse; he was very proud to have attended there as a youngster. And then down the line, he purchased the building and remodeled it into offices.
- M. Biggs:** **No, I didn't know that.**
- P. Boeddinghaus: The Gulya family, from the Clara Barton section.
- M. Biggs:** **I taught there. The year I taught at that school, I taught the retarded youngsters. I had them one year. And then Clara Barton, I taught everything. I had seventh- and eighth-grade geography, seventh- and eighth-grade spelling, seventh- and eighth-grade writing, seventh-grade health, ninth-grade algebra. I had everything. I had the—and my teacher lived with me—I had five science classes, she had one plan to draw. Those five sciences classes, she had the same schedule.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And down the line, they built a middle school on Jackson Avenue called Herbert Hoover [Middle School]. And then Clara Barton probably only went up as far as sixth grade. And then the middle school was in Herbert Hoover.

M. Biggs: Where is that?

P. Boeddinghaus: On Jackson Avenue. That's the street—

M. Biggs: I'm not sure. Is it near Fords or down towards Fords?

P. Boeddinghaus: No, it's in the Clara Barton section, when you would come from Metuchen, maybe a block before Clara Barton School and to the right, Jackson Avenue.

M. Biggs: There was a hospital there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Where was the hospital?

M. Biggs: The hospital was farther down, in [Perth] Amboy.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, Perth Amboy General Hospital. Now it's called Raritan Bay [Medical Center].

M. Biggs: Because you went down there, I think there was a big church down there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Our Lady of Peace Church. And there was another school, Sand Hills.

M. Biggs: Oh yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever teach at Sand Hills?

M. Biggs: No. That was the one-room country school. That's where Miss Purcell, that one teacher taught there.

P. Boeddinghaus: One of my sisters attended there. And the building still exists. And for a while, the Girl Scout Council had their offices at Sand Hills School.

M. Biggs: That's the one I told that—Miss Purcell, I think her name was. I had her kids at—I think she only went to sixth grade or something; that's all she had room for, I guess. And I got the—her kids were really smart. She was a good teacher. I didn't know her, but I had her kids.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now that area that we're talking about in Edison is now supposedly called the "downtown" section of Edison.

M. Biggs: Where's that?

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, around Clara Barton School. And they have beautified—they, being the local government—have beautified that area with benches and planters and Victorian light fixtures and paved the sidewalk with brick. And it's being called the downtown of Edison.

M. Biggs: **How did they get all of that? Who lives there? The mayor?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, it's not too swift because they've jugged the curb out into the road, and it's very strange because when you are trying to drive through, you can't stay on the right if the car in front of you is making a left. You have to stop. So, it's kind of a bollocks.

Well, we are winding now here on our tape. And I was going to ask you if there is anything else that you'd like to say for posterity?

M. Biggs: **Nothing that I think of particularly. I had lots of good friends up there. And I'm afraid many of them are gone already.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You think you will—you have outlived your colleagues.

M. Biggs: **Yeah, well some of them are close, quite a number of my friends up there—I went there when I was about twenty-two, so a lot of my friends were older—older than me. So not many people are older than me.**

M. Vajo: How old are you now?

M. Biggs: **One hundred and two.**

P. Boeddinghaus: That's what I wanted to ask you. To what do you attribute your longevity?

M. Biggs: **Well, I guess as a kid I wouldn't do anything, read anything, and I thought it would hurt me. Never. If I got sick, I'd miss something and I was too nosy to miss anything. And I remember, I guess that helped me too, because I remember the—we were down at Corson's Inlet—Strathmere they call it now. And my father was bringing the basics, like sugar and flour and stuff, and among these things was coffee. And when lunch time came, he wasn't there, so we'd had just a sandwich, which we'd brought on the train because all of us couldn't come on the boat. And when we got—I think I was about eight years old maybe, maybe a little older—and I came in and somebody said to my mother, "Where's the coffee?" And she said, "I don't have it, it's in the boat." Somebody said, "You can't have a meal without coffee." I said, "If you can't have a meal without coffee, I'll never drink another cup." And I never have. But that's what was making me sick. Everybody else drank coffee, and I didn't think that would make me sick. I didn't drink it often, but when I had it that usually was the time I got [unclear] sick to my stomach and all this, and I think the coffee was doing it. I didn't have it after I quit.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah well, there's a lot of caffeine in coffee and can cause health disorders—ulcers and so forth.

M. Biggs: **There's caffeine in chocolate too. Now they say chocolate is good for you.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. You sound like my husband. [laughs]

And what else do you attribute to your longevity?

M. Biggs: **I don't know. I suppose just good genes.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Good genes?

M. Biggs: I always said—I never drank. I never smoked. I was always very athletic, very active. And during the Depression, when stuff was rationed, if I had meat once a week it was lucky [unclear]. You could get fish without blue—I think you had blue points. That was a long time ago so you didn't have any—I remember the teachers had to ration them out to families who didn't have any work. It took sixteen blue points—you didn't get too many—to buy a pound of butter.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you lived through that rationing with the coupons and the tokens.

M. Biggs: You could get fish, as I said, without rationing. But meat was rationed. I think meat was sixteen blue points a pound, and butter was.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you think your genes and your healthy diet, and your vegetables—

M. Biggs: Probably. Who knows? I was always very active.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you were active. [man speaking quietly in background] And your mental outlook always seemed to be positive.

M. Biggs: So, I had a pretty tough life, losing my children and everything. But my expression was, "If you have a barrel of apples given to you, you don't throw them away because there's one rotten one in it."

P. Boeddinghaus: That's a good philosophy. What are some of your other philosophies?

M. Biggs: "No matter how hungry you are, you never eat your seed corn." [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: That's a good one. Marie is a farmer; she could appreciate that.

M. Biggs: Where are you?

M. Vajo: I grew up in Middlebush, which is on the other side of New Brunswick.

M. Biggs: How big a farm?

M. Vajo: One hundred and ten acres.

M. Biggs: That's a farm. What do you raise mainly?

M. Vajo: My grandfather raised corn, wheat, oats. He raised pigs. The biggest thing was chickens—he had about 500 chickens.

M. Biggs: Showerson [phonetic] farms, they had pigs and chickens. Not too many chickens they had, but they had pigs. And they raised them; there were a lot of scraps and stuff—the chickens [unclear].

M. Vajo: Yeah, and he had cows. Of course, we had a big garden.

M. Biggs: That was the best living. You had everything fresh.

M. Vajo: Yeah, a lot of hard work. But it was good work. So it was a good life.

M. Biggs: **It's the best, healthiest life I think there is. It's not easy. The dairy people would have to be up so early in the morning—three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning—because that milk had to be out there to be picked up to get to the creamery by six or seven o'clock because we distributed. It went out early to the customers. So it was a rough life.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, you were duty-bound to the animals.

M. Vajo: Oh yeah.

M. Biggs: **And there are no days off. Even on Leap Year, you get the extra day. [laughter]**

M. Vajo: No weekends.

M. Biggs: **No time off at all, unless you've got somebody there to take care of stuff.**

M. Vajo: Yeah. Well, my grandfather never did any work on Sunday, except feeding the chickens—you know, the animals, take care of those. But otherwise, he would not work on Sunday.

P. Boeddinghaus: Were you church-affiliated out in Edison?

M. Biggs: **I used to go to mostly the Baptist Church that was down there on Amboy Avenue. There was another one there for a while. I went to that Marconnier [Union Chapel at 2196 Oak Tree Road].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. We have pictures of that church in the archives, yes.

M. Biggs: **And then they sold it, turned it into a theater [Historic Edison Valley Playhouse] or something. I don't know what.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

M. Biggs: **So then I went to the other one, down in Metuchen.**

P. Boeddinghaus: The other Baptist church? Yes, on Route 27? Oh no, it was on Clinton Place.

M. Biggs: **No, the one on Plainfield—the one on Oak Tree Road there too. I don't know what they call that church.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, the church in Metuchen—the [First] Baptist Church—was on a side street, Clinton Avenue by the post office, until such time as they moved out to the new facility on [225] Route 27 / Middlesex Avenue. It's a very nice big church.

M. Biggs: **That was the old Lincoln Highway**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Well we thank you for your time—

M. Biggs: **Well thank you for coming.**

P. Boeddinghaus: —and sharing your memories with us, very interesting.

M. Biggs: I enjoyed it. I always wanted to travel around and see things. And I told you, we'd sleep in tents, sleep on the ground. I had my little gas stove—five-pound gas tank—and a little two-burner. And I have a three-burner like the Red Cross uses in emergencies. I have two of those; one two-burner and one three-burner. Cooking meals as you go along. By doing that, I got to most all of the states going around.

P. Boeddinghaus: And later in life, did you go on any elder hostel trips?

M. Biggs: No, but when I retired, my retirement gift was money in the travel bureau. So, I got a twenty-two-day vacation in Europe.

P. Boeddinghaus: Wonderful. Nice, very nice.

M. Biggs: I paid it. The [unclear] wasn't expensive, 4-H I think they called it. It was a bus trip through Europe, so we got to see stuff.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, you're right. Hands-on.

M. Biggs: We landed in England. Then of course when we went over to the other side [of Europe]—we went over on the ferry, I guess you call it over—because the Chunnel wasn't there then. And we went over on the ferry. Then we had to get another bus on the other side, because England drives on the left side of the road. And they [Europe] drive like we do on the other side, so we couldn't have the same bus.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. You have to watch crossing the street. You look the wrong way automatically.

M. Biggs: I thought all the time we were going to run into somebody. And all day long you'd say, "No right turns, no right turns." Just the opposite that we had, on the wrong side of the road and no right turns. I thought sure enough we were going to hit somebody. It seemed so strange.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, we thank you again for letting us interview you.

M. Biggs: Well, I thank you for coming. If you are ever serious, stop in again.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now we know where you are, and you had very good directions. And we'll send you a copy of the tape. We'll keep one in the archives in Metuchen [Public] Library—that's where they are located. And then we'll send you a copy so that you can refer to it. And we have your address, right? One thousand Stagecoach Road—

M. Biggs: Ocean View.

P. Boeddinghaus: Ocean View, New Jersey. And the zip is?

M. Biggs: Zero-eight-two-three-zero-

M. Vajo: I think I have it down.

M. Biggs: One-four-zero-six.

P. Boeddinghaus: Very good. Well, thank you very much again.

M. Biggs: Well thank you.

P. Boeddinghaus: You're very sharp. You have very sharp memories. And we thank you Duncan for giving us some leads

M. Biggs: I said, I think my brain is Velcro—everything sticks. [laughter]

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I love that. Excellent, I'll have to copy that.

M. Biggs: I don't forget things.

M. Vajo: I wish I was that way.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, that's excellent. We'll turn this off now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]