

Nathan A. Gross

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno

Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, 2004 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, June 2019

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Abstract: Nathan Aaron Gross (1899-1979) was born in Fords, New Jersey to Hungarian immigrants, William Gross and Nettie (Klein) Gross. His father and his uncle, Aaron Gross, moved to Middlesex County in the late nineteenth century and established a successful grocery business that delivered food via horse and wagon to the local area. His other uncles included Dr. Herman Gross, a Metuchen physician who had an office at 344 Main Street, and David Gross, who ran the Hillside Inn along Main Street between Hillside Avenue and Highland Avenue. The Hillside Inn was purchased by his father, William Gross. Mr. Gross had four siblings: Ida Gross, Jennie (Gross) Schwalb, Milton Gross, and Henry Gross.

As a child, Mr. Gross helped out at his father's grocery and coal businesses. He was drafted during World War I and worked for the American Red Cross. Mr. Gross owned Gross Oil Company, with a home office and a garage on Woodbridge Avenue in Edison, for over forty years. He was married to Anna (Rosenblum) Gross and they had one daughter, Norma. Mr. Gross is buried at Beth Mordecai Cemetery in Perth Amboy.

In this interview, Mr. Gross discusses his father's grocery business as well as his family history that includes the death of his uncle, Dr. Herman Gross, from influenza in 1918. He also reminisces about other local families, businesses, and churches in Metuchen during the early twentieth century

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P. Bruno: Today is June 21, 1978 and this is Paula Bruno interviewing Mr. Nathan A. Gross born September 5, 1899—oh, I'm sorry, October 5, 1899—and he's residing right now at 745 Amboy Avenue, Edison, New Jersey. Mr. Gross, I'd first like to start by asking a little bit about your ancestors and when they first came to settle in this area.

N. A. Gross: My father and my uncle came to Raritan Township, which is now Edison Township, I would say about 1889. We ran a grocery business and a general store. And in the early 1900s, they built a tremendous building and we supplied the various areas like Metuchen, Menlo Park, Iselin, South Plainfield—delivery only by horse and wagon.

P. Bruno: Wow. Could you tell me your father's name and your uncle's name?

- N. A. Gross:** **My father's name was William Gross and my uncle's name was Aaron Gross. They traded as William Gross and Brother.**
- P. Bruno: Where did they get their supplies from?
- N. A. Gross:** **Their supplies came in mainly by railroad car—railroad freight cars. And also, meats were brought in by solid wagonloads, team loads, at the time.**
- P. Bruno: Solid wagons?
- N. A. Gross:** **Well yes, wagonload. They'd bring out a complete wagonload of meats, and they would put into our—there were huge iceboxes in those days.**
- P. Bruno: So, your father and uncle's business supplied other stores in the area?
- N. A. Gross:** **No, mainly private homes and also many boarding houses. They had a lot of boarding houses in those days.**
- P. Bruno: Oh, any that you remember in the Metuchen area, boarding houses?
- N. A. Gross:** **Well, we delivered—the Wood Brook Farms was out here on the Plainfield Road that was also in Edison; we delivered there. And then in the Bonhamtown area, we had, oh, possibly eight or ten good-sized boarding houses where— [recording paused for knock at the door]**
- P. Bruno: Okay, getting back to your father's and uncle's business. Did you have one horse and wagon?
- N. A. Gross:** **We ran seventeen or eighteen wagons.**
- P. Bruno: Wow!
- N. A. Gross:** **How could you cover all this area?**
- P. Bruno: I don't know. I was wondering. It must have been a really large business then.
- N. A. Gross:** **Oh yes, that's before the days of the chain stores. Oh yes, and we ran—I would say offhand—thirty-five or forty in help.**
- P. Bruno: That was quite a business I think for that period of time, yes.
- N. A. Gross:** **Quite a business, yes.**
- P. Bruno: Did you work in the business when you were younger, helping out?
- N. A. Gross:** **As a child after school hours and then such and possibly on a Saturday. I used to deliver meat orders up here for Sunday's dinners on Saturday. They didn't have refrigeration the way they do today, they had iceboxes. And if you had extremely hot weather, the iceman just didn't have enough to supply the area.**
- P. Bruno: So what would happen in those cases? Would it affect your meat orders any, if people couldn't get their ice?

- N. A. Gross:** Well you see, I delivered on Saturdays, mainly for Sunday's dinners.
- P. Bruno: So there wasn't much of a problem in storage?
- N. A. Gross:** Well, I mean, they did the best they could.
- P. Bruno: Does any one incident that you can remember about your father's business that sticks out in your mind?
- N. A. Gross:** Well, I believe that we had the best clientele—most of the best clientele—around because we did enough volume where we could control things, you see. Yeah, we made sure that everything was properly stocked, and everything was delivered. And this thing [tape] is on?
- P. Bruno: [long pause] Now did you have an oil business as well?
- N. A. Gross:** This came. I just sold my business—I think it was November the twenty-third of [19]77.
- P. Bruno: So you had an oil business?
- N. A. Gross:** I had it. It wasn't connected. They sold kerosene oil for your kerosene lamps in those days. But I sold oil for private use at homes and also to some commercial accounts and to apartment houses.
- P. Bruno: And how did you come to get into the oil business?
- N. A. Gross:** Well, I was mechanical—I was always mechanical—and this was a challenge to me. And I was in it forty-two years and in those days, I never had a salesman. The people that really sold for me were my accounts, and we never considered them accounts. We felt that people were our friends and it was up to us to see that they were properly taken care of. Ninety percent of our people became close friends of ours. In fact, when we sold out, I got, I think, it was forty-nine letters from my people—how upset they were. Some of them cried over the phone. Because it was never a question, you took care of your friends, that was all.
- P. Bruno: I think that's the best kind of business to have.
- N. A. Gross:** That's right. And I had one customer—then I—being friends, you knew them so well. You knew they were honest. They got into financial difficulties, people being out of work or sickness in the family, or more payables than they had receivables. And I was right most of the time. I did lose a little money, but not too much. But most of my people, they came through and realized that they had these bills and they paid them. Some of them were long winded, but—and I never regretted it. I had these letters there—I was going to bring some up—but I thought why burden you with it.
- P. Bruno: Oh, you shouldn't feel that way. But I'm sure that they made you feel very good knowing that you provided a service.
- N. A. Gross:** They did.

P. Bruno: Was this called the Gross Oil Business?

N. A. Gross: Gross Oil Company, Incorporated.

P. Bruno: And where was it located?

N. A. Gross: We had our office at home [at 745 Amboy Avenue] and our garage was about two blocks away on Woodbridge Avenue in Edison.

P. Bruno: Let's talk about your uncle, Dr. Herman Gross, for a little while. Now he had his office in Metuchen.

N. A. Gross: Right.

P. Bruno: And it was next to the [Metuchen] Post Office on [344] Main Street?

N. A. Gross: That's right.

P. Bruno: What sort of practice did he have?

N. A. Gross: He had a general practice and, in those days, they worked seven days a week and they worked around the clock.

P. Bruno: In other words, he made house calls?

N. A. Gross: Oh, they made house calls and they didn't worry whether they collected for them or not. Those calls had to be made. And, I want to turn that off. [recording paused]

P. Bruno: Okay, in talking about your uncle's practice, what do you remember about it?

N. A. Gross: He had a tremendous practice.

P. Bruno: You mentioned that people from New York and Newark came.

N. A. Gross: And I remember he had one call, the other end of Staten Island, and he said to these people, he said, "You know, you're just wasting your money." He said, "I have to charge you a lot of money to come from Metuchen here." It took him a half a day to go and come and wait for ferries and so on. And they said, "Well Dr. Gross," I was over there with him, "if you're willing, if you'll only come, we will pay your price." About a fifteen-dollar call, for which [unclear] a half a million in those days. My grandmother [Rose Gross], his mother, lived with us and he stopped in there practically every day, and she knew what he liked, and he liked his mother's cooking.

P. Bruno: Did his family live in Metuchen?

N. A. Gross: They lived in that house there [at 344 Main Street]. Right on--yes.

P. Bruno: So his office was in his house?

- N. A. Gross:** **In his house. He had a tremendous office there. In fact, the other day I was discussing it. I'm having a louver window put in my attic so I can turn the handle and air that attic out. This way we have to raise windows and it's quite difficult. So I have a huge attic fan, I couldn't take full advantage of it until I got these louver windows in it. And that's been in there twenty-five years or more now. I always wanted to do this and this year I finally [did]. So I was telling my— [recording paused].**
- P. Bruno: Okay, getting back to your uncle and his practice just a little bit more, do you remember how many other doctors were in Metuchen at this time your uncle was practicing?
- N. A. Gross:** **Yes. There was a Dr. Clarence Hofer [physician at 463 Main Street] and a Dr. [Lansing] Lippincott [physician at 37 Highland Avenue], and they were practicing doctors; and then you had the Manning Freeman [lumber] yard who was Dr. [Charles Manning] Freeman that was also an MD [medical doctor], but he never practiced.**
- P. Bruno: Oh, how come?
- N. A. Gross:** **Well he ran this yard and I suppose he didn't want the responsibility.**
- P. Bruno: Were the other doctors as busy as your uncle in town?
- N. A. Gross:** **I didn't think so. I didn't think so. But some of the people I dealt with in recent years—when we talk—they remembered him and he died in 1918 so that's—**
- P. Bruno: This is your uncle Herman Gross, Dr. Gross? That's quite a long time ago. Were there any major epidemics or illnesses?
- N. A. Gross:** **Yes, he died during the [Spanish] flu epidemic, mainly from overwork. I remember he got so many calls and he didn't feel well. And he made them and said, "Well, this is the last call I'm going to make." So when he got back, he had some of his dear friends, who were sick, and he said, "Well I have to make these, I can't let them down." He made them and he ran until he couldn't go any further, until he collapsed.**
- P. Bruno: When there was the flu epidemic, did they have some sort of a serum that they would inject people with so they didn't get the flu? Or what was his treatment?
- N. A. Gross:** **I don't remember. The flu epidemic was something like the movie and people burned up with fever. I had one of my school chums in public school—and I worked with the [American] Red Cross—and I went home and I took the ice out of our icebox and I cracked it up and put it on his head and he said, "That feels fine, that feels fine." That's the last words that he ever spoke.**
- P. Bruno: And he would sometimes take you with him to make house calls and visits, your uncle?
- N. A. Gross:** **Not during the epidemic. During the epidemic, I worked with the Red Cross.**
- P. Bruno: And what did you do with the Red Cross?

N. A. Gross: Well, I drove and I would help wherever I could, possibly moving patients, something like that.

P. Bruno: Did your uncle have any children?

N. A. Gross: Yes, he had three daughters and a son.

P. Bruno: And are any of them in the area?

N. A. Gross: In New York.

P. Bruno: In New York. Okay, why don't we talk about your uncle who owned and operated the Hillside Inn? This was David Gross. Did he build the inn himself?

N. A. Gross: No, no.

P. Bruno: The inn was already there?

N. A. Gross: The inn was there, right. That was the entire block from Hillside [Avenue] to Highland Avenue with a small exception, possibly thirty or forty feet, there was a small building on—I think it was the original movie theater that they had in Metuchen, just a small place, before they built the bigger one [Forum Theatre] on outer Main [Street].

P. Bruno: How did your uncle come to acquire the inn?

N. A. Gross: My father—we did quite a business in Metuchen—and my uncle wanted something to do. He had to have something to do. So my father bought the inn and my uncle ran it.

P. Bruno: I see.

N. A. Gross: And in the early days, the doctor and my aunt lived there.

P. Bruno: Can you describe the building a little bit? How it looked like?

N. A. Gross: There was quite an incline there and there was a walkway where you could walk off Main Street and walk up quite a few steps to walk towards the inn. And then you had a circular drive where you cut in on Main Street and came out on Highland Avenue. And there was also a drive in the back where you went in on Hillside Avenue and you would come out on Highland. It was a huge building and people would take and live there on a weekly or monthly basis. They had beautiful rooms there.

P. Bruno: Were these people who came to stay there? Were they local people or were they mostly out-of-towners that were passing through?

N. A. Gross: Well, very often it was someone that worked in the area, you see. And if they didn't have their family or if they were single, why they had all kinds of accommodations there. They had excellent food and all of the facilities that you would want.

P. Bruno: Who did the cooking?

N. A. Gross: They had a couple chefs there. They worked in shift work.

P. Bruno: And how many rooms or how large was the inn? About how many people could they accommodate at one time?

N. A. Gross: I believe the inn must have had thirty to thirty-five rooms.

P. Bruno: Did people also stay at the inn that were just like traveling through Metuchen?

N. A. Gross: At times, yes.

P. Bruno: And sometimes they were people just in town who had local jobs?

N. A. Gross: Right.

P. Bruno: How long did you uncle have the [Hillside] Inn?

N. A. Gross: I'm not quite sure, but I think that, I would say from a period of twenty-five to thirty-five years.

P. Bruno: Did he sell the inn to somebody else afterwards?

N. A. Gross: My father sold the inn. My grandfather, yes.

P. Bruno: Your father sold the inn.

N. A. Gross: Yes. And that entire block—if my memory serves me right—went for about \$35,000 or \$38,000.

P. Bruno: Oh my!

N. A. Gross: The price of a garage today.

P. Bruno: Yes, it's amazing what land value—how land value has gone up so tremendously.

N. A. Gross: You don't realize that at my age, I don't know whether I lived in five or ten different worlds, in the same area. I lived about a mile from where I was born, and I lived in that area my entire life. And I would like to say this, that we had a lot of poverty in those days. People didn't even know they were poor because the fellow next door and the fellow across the street was in the same fix. And we had all nationalities there, and they got along as if they were one close family. And a fellow would dig his garden, the neighbors would come in and pitch in and give him a hand. And if they were sawing and chopping wood, they'd do the same thing. And in those days, the laborer worked for ten cents an hour, he worked ten hours for a dollar. But we had six cottages in those days, when they were new, the rental was five dollars a month. They had a bucket well. They had an outhouse. But I remember many happy families came out of those houses. And three of them are still standing out of those six.

- P. Bruno: Now these were cottages that your father owned?
- N. A. Gross: **He owned them and he rented them. And when they were new, they were rented for five dollars a month. This goes back maybe seventy or seventy-five years.**
- P. Bruno: And where are these three remaining cottages located?
- N. A. Gross: **Well—about a half—I would say less than a mile from where I live, in the Sand Hills section of Edison.**
- P. Bruno: It's really hard to believe that things cost so little.
- N. A. Gross: **As I told you, I don't know how many different worlds I lived in, in the same area.**
- P. Bruno: The patrons at the Hillside Inn, were they mostly wealthier people?
- N. A. Gross: **Yes, the better class people.**
- P. Bruno: Were there any other inns in the area? Did your uncle have any competition of any kind?
- N. A. Gross: **Well they usually had their constant trade and that's it. I wouldn't know. I think there was a Metuchen Inn too, on Amboy Avenue.**
- P. Bruno: Would that be the same one that is now located on Middlesex [Avenue], about a block down from the [Metuchen Public] Library?
- N. A. Gross: **No, they had no connections at all.**
- P. Bruno: A different Metuchen Inn. Did you ever help out your uncle at the Hillside Inn?
- N. A. Gross: **Just a few rare occasions.**
- P. Bruno: But it was a nice place to stay.
- N. A. Gross: **Oh yes, it was outstanding.**
- P. Bruno: Okay, did your father have any other brothers?
- N. A. Gross: **Well, there was my Uncle Aaron [Gross], he had—my Uncle Dave [David Gross], the doctor [Dr. Herman Gross], and himself [William Gross]. That's four boys, and then he had three sisters.**
- P. Bruno: Your Uncle Aaron was in the grocery business with your father?
- N. A. Gross: **With my father, right.**
- P. Bruno: Okay, that's about all. Did I cover your family well enough? Did I leave anybody out?
- N. A. Gross: **I believe you did cover quite—**

P. Bruno: Let's talk about some Metuchen town remembrances that you mentioned to me on the phone. One was the livery stable?

N. A. Gross: Yes, I have that on my sheet. [referring to notes]

P. Bruno: Can you tell me where it was in Metuchen?

N. A. Gross: One was on Middlesex Avenue. Some of my names there may be misspelled.

P. Bruno: That's okay.

N. A. Gross: There was a Rule-R-u-l-e, I believe-Livery Stable. [John] Flaherty had one. And then we had a cabbie-what was the name down there? [referring to notes]

P. Bruno: You probably can find it quicker than I could.

N. A. Gross: [long pause] It was [John] Dempsey-

P. Bruno: Dempsey, right.

N. A. Gross: Horse and wagon [cab]. And then A. C. Litterst, he managed the bank [Metuchen National Bank]. I don't know what his official capacity was.

P. Bruno: He was the second mayor of Metuchen, Alexander Litterst.

N. A. Gross: Well, I know him well. He used to have his lunch up at the inn. I remember that.

P. Bruno: Oh, so people could come to the Hillside Inn to dine only.

N. A. Gross: That's right. Now did you know there was a needle works [The Loyal T. Ives Company] in Metuchen, on [544] Middlesex Avenue?

P. Bruno: No, what sort of needle works?

N. A. Gross: They used to make straight needles, or make them there-they were there for years. I remember them there for twenty or thirty years.

P. Bruno: They used to manufacture needles-like sewing needles? I don't really know what kind?

N. A. Gross: Whether they were machine needles or sewing machine or hand sewing, I don't know¹. And then you had two drug stores in town. One was [George] Hahm's [at 412 Main Street], where Wernik [Pharmacy] is now, and the other one was Burroughs Drug Store [Metuchen Pharmacy at 396 Main Street] and the family died off.

And here is something that may be of interest to you-out of Metuchen, out of St. Francis [of Assisi] Church, I think there was a Father [John J.] Foley. I may be wrong with the name, but he was one of the priests they had here. He would come out in an old horse and wagon and the first Mass was served up here. This was

¹ The Loyal T. Ives Company manufactured knitting machines needles and employed 15 people in 1918.

the meeting hall and most of these people here came to a meeting, you see. And it was up to the Catholics that worked for us to see that the pot stove was going, and also that the place was kept clean.

P. Bruno: So their meeting hall was in your father's store?

N. A. Gross: In the original store, right. And I was born in this place here. [referring to photo]

P. Bruno: Was that your home next door or was that connected? I can't really see.

N. A. Gross: No.

P. Bruno: It was one building?

N. A. Gross: No, no. They were separated. See the name on the wagon?

P. Bruno: It was separated. Yes.

N. A. Gross: This may be a little crude, but the Salomone family is still here.

P. Bruno: They had a tailor shop?

N. A. Gross: They had a tailor shop [Ralph Salomone] and then there was a shoe repair, [Alfonso] Salomone, another brother.

P. Bruno: Both on Main Street.

N. A. Gross: Both on Main.

P. Bruno: Now just so I can get a period of time, was this early 1900s that were talking about?

N. A. Gross: I would say so, yes. And then Kramer Department Store [at 441 Main Street]—Kramer worked for Tom Edison and he's the one that started him in the department store because they had to have a place to buy.

P. Bruno: And that really grew into a large business.

N. A. Gross: Yes. Well in those days we didn't have the type businesses that we have today. Now here are your tavern owners—Dan Whalen, there's a McGuinness [Saloon at 419 Main Street], and a [James] Lawless [at Albany Hotel at 435 Main Street]. And [George] Melick—he also worked for Edison—he was an electrician. And Daniel LaForge had a grocery store [at 401 Main Street]. Dave Powers [David A. Power], he ran the harness shop [at 421 Main Street] and a fellow by the name of Eubank, Harry Eubank, worked for him. And John Almond—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Bruno: Just some more town remembrances—there was a feed store also in town?

- N. A. Gross:** Yes, Thomas Eggert had a feed store, corner Main Street [and Amboy Avenue] on Metuchen where the gas station is now.
- P. Bruno: And did you supply him with some feeds, your father's business?
- N. A. Gross:** I believe they did some business. We ran more than any feed store did. We bought direct on everything. I remember at one time my father bought eleven carloads of baking flour.
- P. Bruno: Oh my!
- N. A. Gross:** Approximately thirty ton to a car. He heard that flour was going to skyrocket, and in those days, bakeries were few and far between. And most of these boarding houses would buy 200 or 300 pounds of flour. They didn't go in with a four- or five-pound sack the way they do today. We sold flour. I remember flour did skyrocket; it doubled in price. And we had a fellow come out with a wagon from Perth Amboy and he said, "Do you have Gold Medal flour?" And my father said, "Oh yes, we have a lot more than you can possibly use." Well he said, "How much is it, a barrel?" So my father quoted a price and he said, "I'd like to have two barrels." And in those days, I think it was 196 pounds to a barrel. So my father said, "Mr. Knudson, we'll deliver the flour for you." He said, "Oh no, I have my team out here. Do you mind having your men put it on my wagon?" He was afraid he wasn't going to get it at that price. So after he got it and paid for it and said, "How is it they want so much more for flour downtown?" So he [my father] said, "I don't know," but he said, "I made a day's pay on each barrel of flour and that's enough for me." I stood right there.
- P. Bruno: Your father seemed like he had a good head for business.
- N. A. Gross:** Yes, my father was a good businessman. My father made three to four fortunes and he went through them.
- P. Bruno: What about some of the prominent people in town, in Metuchen? Any of the families do you remember?
- N. A. Gross:** Well, I have a few listed there, right above where your hand is. [referring to notes]
- P. Bruno: Oh, the Carman family and the Nate Robins [Nathan Robins] family. We have a tape of Mr. [Charles B.] Carman, of Major Carman.
- N. A. Gross:** I know him well. He isn't too well now. I've known him most of my life.
- P. Bruno: What about Judge Weber, judge and colonel. I haven't really heard of him. He was a colonel?
- N. A. Gross:** An ex-colonel and he became judge. He's the fellow I went to that gave me my custody.
- P. Bruno: Oh.

- N. A. Gross:** **And the Robins Building [Robins Hall at 401 Main Street]—for several years, you had a sewing factory there. Anyone tell you about that?**
- P. Bruno: No, they didn't. What did they produce?
- N. A. Gross:** **Shirtwaist, high-class shirtwaist.**
- P. Bruno: And who ran the factory? Do you remember?
- N. A. Gross:** **A fellow [unclear] that worked for us. I can't think of his name. There were two men running it. It was high-class shirtwaist.**
- P. Bruno: You also mentioned to me a little bit about—you're good friends with Mary Wilkins Freeman's husband [Dr. Charles Manning Freeman]?
- N. A. Gross:** **Yes, we were in—my father was in the coal business at the time. We delivered coal; he was also in the coal business. It was friendly competition, we never—and he had a fellow—you've heard of the Breen family?**
- P. Bruno: Yes.
- N. A. Gross:** **Well John Breen—I think was his name—he ran the office for Freeman.**
- P. Bruno: Did you know Mary Wilkins Freeman though?
- N. A. Gross:** **I knew her. But I knew who she was and that's all.**
- P. Bruno: Did you ever read any of her books?
- N. A. Gross:** **I saw them, but I never took the time to read them.**
- P. Bruno: What about holidays? Did people dress up for Halloween?
- N. A. Gross:** **Oh yes, yes, yes. And I knew all your churches in town. I didn't mention that.**
- P. Bruno: There's quite a few churches still in Metuchen today.
- N. A. Gross:** **Yeah, the same churches are still there—the [First] Presbyterian Church and then the [Centenary] Methodist [Episcopal] Church and then the church on Middlesex Avenue. Was it the [Dutch] Reformed Church?**
- P. Bruno: On Middlesex Avenue? I think the Reformed Church is up by Tommy's Pond.
- N. A. Gross:** **That's right. That burned, the original church [on Amboy Avenue] burned down. And then this one on Middlesex Avenue, what church is that?**
- P. Bruno: The one that Venture Theater is now? I think that was a Methodist church.
- N. A. Gross:** **I know the Methodist, that I remember. But that's the corner of Middlesex [Avenue]. There's one up—?**
- P. Bruno: Oh, a Baptist church.

N. A. Gross: I think so. Well, we delivered coal there.

P. Bruno: To the [First] Baptist Church?

N. A. Gross: To the Baptist Church. And my father and my brother went up with the men to show them where it was, and my father said, "Make sure the men watch their language." And he said, "And see that you behave too." So when he got back, he said, "Dad I learned a lot of new curse words up there from the minister's son—damned everything."

P. Bruno: What was a typical Thanksgiving like?

N. A. Gross: Well, I think they were a lot more sacred than they are today. People want to run out and grab a meal, but everything was done at home.

P. Bruno: And did you have a large family gathering?

N. A. Gross: Yes, we did. We had aunts and uncles. My grandmother lived with us and she had two daughters in Perth Amboy, and they were quite close. And she would say, "Well, I'm going to spend one week with Molly, and another week with Terry, so be a good boy and take me down." So I took her down in the horse and carriage, and in two days, I got an SOS [Morse code distress signal] to go down and get her. She couldn't live with her daughters; she lived with the daughter-in-law. She told my father, he said (it was his mother), "I'm not living with you while she's living with me" [i.e.] the daughter-in-law.

P. Bruno: How about Halloween or just any other holidays in town?

N. A. Gross: With Halloween, we, like other kids, turned over outhouses and things like that.

P. Bruno: This was Mischief Night?

N. A. Gross: Mischief Night. We did our share of mischief, sure. No different. It hasn't changed.

P. Bruno: And young children used to dress up in costumes and trick-or-treat?

N. A. Gross: Oh yes. Right.

P. Bruno: Well, I think maybe we will end with just—you knew Metuchen in its very early age and Metuchen has really grown a lot but it still has maintained a small-town image. And I wonder if you can just talk about some of the changes and the growth that you've seen?

N. A. Gross: Yes, there has been a tremendous growth. I'm sure that in my early days, the population of Metuchen was way under 2,000. But I think I would like to go back partway to the early days of Metuchen for the simple reason that we had fresh air, we never heard of air pollution, and there was practically no tension. Now what are those three items worth to a person living today? How would you weigh anything like that?

P. Bruno: Yes, it would be hard to.

N. A. Gross: We had to respect our elders. You hear kids talking back to their parents today if you like smacking them, and sometimes the parents are not much better.

P. Bruno: I can't think of anything else to ask you. Do you have anything else to add?

N. A. Gross: Just let me just look at this sheet that I have here.

P. Bruno: Okay, if I left out anything really important on this list.

N. A. Gross: [looking at notes and muffled speaking] This Pete Rosenvinge² was next to [George] Hanemann's Bakery [at 395 Main Street], and the last time I saw Mr. LaForge—his daughter was an account of mine—on the corner where my uncle's house is. What is that? How long have you been in Metuchen?

P. Bruno: Oh, I'm from New Brunswick. I haven't been in Metuchen very long. But where your uncle's—that's Main Street and Station Place, is it?

N. A. Gross: No, his original office was on Station Place. Where the First Baptist Church was before they moved.

P. Bruno: I don't know.

N. A. Gross: It wasn't a Baptist church that we were talking about. Because the Baptist Church, they were an account of mine for over thirty-five years and they moved from—

P. Bruno: Maybe the [St. Luke's] Episcopal Church?

N. A. Gross: Possibly. Yeah, because even towards the end, until last November, they were an account of mine. And I let you get away with it, you see.

P. Bruno: I didn't know.

N. A. Gross: And the Moss family. He is in his nineties now, Irving Moss. His father was friendly with my father, and he was an account of mine until I sold my business.

P. Bruno: What was the Mosses' family business? Did they have a business?

N. A. Gross: I really didn't know, but the father seemed quite prominent in town.

P. Bruno: Is that who one of the schools is named after?

N. A. Gross: After my friend's wife [Mildred B. Moss].

P. Bruno: I see.

N. A. Gross: And not only that, but where the Edgar School is, I have an idea that the Edgar family donated that property to the Borough of Metuchen. I remember that, it's filed away up there.

² He possibly means Otto Rosenvinge, who owned a restaurant at 393 Main Street.

- P. Bruno: Yes. Well you certainly have remembered a lot about Metuchen.
- N. A. Gross: I believe that I know as much as the top 5 or 6 percent do. The two drug stores here, and St. Francis Church there, they would drive down there to say Mass.**
- P. Bruno: That's interesting that St. Francis has their Mass off the top of your father's grocery store.
- N. A. Gross: Yes. And then when we moved to our larger quarters, they still went back. That's until they built the—do you know anything about our area?**
- P. Bruno: No. No, I don't.
- N. A. Gross: Our Lady of Peace [Church] in Fords. Are you Catholic or—?**
- P. Bruno: I'm a Catholic.
- N. A. Gross: Well you'd be surprised how devoted these people were to their religion. That's a fact. They'd go to their confession, and they made sure they didn't do too much out of the way.**
- P. Bruno: What about Christmas? Were Christmases big?
- N. A. Gross: Oh yes, yes, yes. People paid more attention to religion than they do today. You know I don't believe—cut this off? [recording paused]**
- P. Bruno: The stores were courteous?
- N. A. Gross: Right.**
- P. Bruno: You had personalized service when you walked in?
- N. A. Gross: Yes, you always did. And they did their level best to see that you were properly accommodated, and it was a pleasure shopping in those days. Today, your shopping is practically mechanical.**
- P. Bruno: And I think one of the nice things too, shopping way back in the early 1900s, was that the shopkeeper knew you, and you knew him, and it was personalized service.
- N. A. Gross: It was. And that never left me, even in the future years in my business. I still get calls. I haven't been in business since November of [19]77, and there isn't a week that I don't get several calls from my people, "What should I do here? What should I do?" One customer called me, she had a hot water problem, so they came and changed a lot of pipes and everything else and ran up a tremendous bill. And then after they ran this bill up, they said, "You know, this furnace is in bad shape, you need another furnace." Well, the way I would do, I would handle a situation like that and look at things and I'd say, "Now here, don't spend any money on this thing. This thing has seen better days and you're never going to be happy with it. Let's get a price on a new furnace and you'll have it in three or four days." Now, the bill there was close to a hundred dollars—ninety-seven or ninety-eight dollars—just thrown right down the drain and that would upset me.**

P. Bruno: So you maintained that personalized service with your customers through the years in your business?

N. A. Gross: I did. I have people that cried when I quit.

P. Bruno: So just walking down Main Street, you can visualize all the shops and the people on the street?

N. A. Gross: Burrough's Drug Store [at 396 Main Street], the Eagle [Hook and Ladder Company] Firehouse [at 398 Main Street], and then a few doors away was a bank [Metuchen National Bank at 406 Main Street], and then corner Hillside [Avenue] was old man Costa [Ice Cream Shop at 416 Main Street].

P. Bruno: Who had the best ice cream.

N. A. Gross: He had the best ice cream. And that is right. They came from all over—from New Brunswick and Perth Amboy—to eat his ice cream. And I rode into New York with him several times, and he was an Italian—a personal friend of the family's—and he said, "Mr. Gross, I don't need no chemist." He said, "I buy the best stuff," and he said, "I give them the best ice cream." And that was a fact.

P. Bruno: And everybody knew it too.

N. A. Gross: Oh sure. But the sad part of it was, here in recent months, they went under.

P. Bruno: Yes.

N. A. Gross: They went under financially. And I was deeply saddened by it, because people at home buy a half gallon on ice cream, throw it in the freezer, and it's sad. So—alright.

P. Bruno: Well, I'd like to thank you very much for stopping in and sharing with us some of your memories.

N. A. Gross: Well, I hope it will be of interest to someone.

P. Bruno: Shut this off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]