

Otto and Evelyn Drews

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Abstract: Otto Reynold Drews (1884-1981) was born in Danzig, Germany and moved with his family to Falls Township, Pennsylvania as a child. A Metuchen resident since 1905, Mr. Drews worked for several years as chief clerk of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Jersey City. From 1922 to 1925, he was treasurer for the construction company that built the former Victory Bridge in Perth Amboy. Mr. Drews was elected as district clerk of the Metuchen Board of Education in 1920; it was a position he held for forty-three years until his retirement in 1963. As district clerk, he took minutes of all board meetings, handled the bookkeeping, prepared election ballots and petitions for board elections, drew up the budgets, purchased school supplies, and supervised the maintenance of the schools. He was also a member of the Metuchen Rotary Club and former master of the Mt. Zion Lodge No. 135.

Mr. Drews married Sara(h) M. Drews (1885-1941), a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1907. Mrs. Drews was a member of the Borough Improvement League, the YMCA Auxiliary, and the Women's Missionary Society of the First Baptist Church. They had one son, Reynold Drews, who was a graduate of Metuchen High School, Rutgers University, and Harvard Law School. Following the death of his first wife in 1941, Mr. Drews remarried Evelyn N. Drews (1904-1979), who accompanies him on this interview.

In this interview, Mr. Drews discusses his family as well as his recollections of the Metuchen school system and working for the Metuchen Board of Education. He also mentions his other work experiences, his hobbies, his health, and his Metuchen memories including the trolley.

Interview note: The following are notes from the interviewer, "Mr. and Mrs. Otto Drews live in a comfortable four-room apartment in Redfield Village with many cut-glass pieces and other antiques. Mr. Drews has white carefully-combed hair, as does Mrs. Drews, and both of them wear glasses. Both give the impression of being strong, although they do have ailments that keep them from going out driving. Mr. Drews is a crossword puzzle fanatic, keeping cut-out crossword puzzles in a magazine, which he showed me."

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.

D. Heinlein: David Heinlein is interviewing Otto Drews at his home in Edison, New Jersey—or excuse me, in Redfield Village [Apartments in Metuchen], New Jersey. [recording paused]

When were you born here? When were you born?

O. Drews: July 11, 1884.

D. Heinlein: Where?

O. Drews: Danzig, Germany.

D. Heinlein: In Germany? Yes.

O. Drews: Yeah, I'm a full-blood Prussian.

D. Heinlein: A Prussian? I see, I am part German myself.

O. Drews: My father was orderly to Kaiser William the Second¹.

D. Heinlein: He was related to the Kaiser?

E. Drews: He was an orderly.

D. Heinlein: An orderly?

O. Drews: Yeah.

D. Heinlein: I see, I see. What was your mother?

O. Drews: My mother, her name Spritzers.

D. Heinlein: Spritzer?

O. Drews: Yeah, she was part German and part Polish.

D. Heinlein: I see, I see. When did you come to America?

O. Drews: I was two years old, [18]86.

D. Heinlein: I see. What are your first recollections of America?

O. Drews: I don't remember.

¹ Wilhelm II was the last German Emperor and King of Prussia, with his reign lasting from 1888 to his abdication in November 1918 just before Germany's surrender in World War I.

- E. Drews:** A blizzard of [18]88² in those days.
- O. Drews:** Yeah, yeah.
- D. Heinlein: Where were you at the time of the blizzard?
- O. Drews:** Pennsylvania, a place called Fallsington [unincorporated community in Falls Township].
- D. Heinlein: Fallington?
- O. Drews:** Fallsington, yeah.
- D. Heinlein: Fallsington, I see. When did you first come to this area?
- O. Drews:** Oh, about 1905 or [190]6. My son [Reynold Drews] was born in 1909, right over here, yeah.
- D. Heinlein: I see. Where did you used to live?
- O. Drews:** Pennsylvania.
- D. Heinlein: And after that?
- E. Drews:** Well, he moved here, dear.
- O. Drews:** Well, I came to Metuchen.
- D. Heinlein: To Metuchen, I see. And you were on the Board of Education in Metuchen, is that right?
- O. Drews:** Yeah, forty-three years.
- E. Drews:** No, dear. On the Board [of Education]! Not working for the Board.
- O. Drews:** No, secretary and business manager.
- D. Heinlein: You were secretary and business manager of the Board for how long?
- O. Drews:** Forty-three years.
- D. Heinlein: I see, I see.
- E. Drews:** Is this [the speaking] low quality?

² The Great Blizzard of 1888 was one of the most severe blizzards in American history with snow falling between ten and fifty-eight inches and winds at more than forty-five miles per hour in parts of New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

D. Heinlein: No. When did you start working on the Board?

O. Drews: Nineteen-hundred-twenty.

D. Heinlein: Nineteen-hundred-twenty. So you must have been thirty-six?

O. Drews: I'd imagine so, yeah.

D. Heinlein: Yeah, yeah. And you were secretary and—

O. Drews: Business manager.

D. Heinlein: Business manager. What did you have to do around the beginning of your time on the Board?

E. Drews: Well, he used to do part-time work. He did this on his own.

O. Drews: Yeah, I was part-time for quite a while.

D. Heinlein: I see. What other kinds of work were you doing?

O. Drews: I worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad for eighteen years. After that, I was in the contracting business, helped build the Victory Bridge as first job.

D. Heinlein: You helped build what?

E. Drews: The Victory Bridge.

O. Drews: Victory Bridge³. I [was] purchasing agent and timekeeper and everything else now.

D. Heinlein: For the Victory Bridge?

O. Drews: Yeah.

D. Heinlein: Which bridge is that?

O. Drews: It's between Perth Amboy and South Amboy. Let's see Route 7 [Route 35 over Raritan River], I think, before they built a new one.

D. Heinlein: I see. How many years did you work on that project?

O. Drews: About three and a half.

³ The Victory Bridge was a steel swing-span road bridge completed in 1926 to carry Route 35 over the Raritan River between Perth Amboy and Sayreville. The bridge was designed by Clarence W. Hudson and contracted by Stillman-Delhanty-Ferris. The structure was dedicated to the U.S. troops who served in World War I. This bridge was demolished in 2004 and replaced with a new high-level fixed bridge.

D. Heinlein: Three and a half years, I see. And how many hours were you working on the School Board during the time when you were doing your other work?

O. Drews: Mostly meetings and nighttime doing the typing. I had a typewriter at home.

D. Heinlein: Yes, because you were secretary.

O. Drews: Yeah.

D. Heinlein: I see. Your son was raised in Metuchen?

O. Drews: Yes.

D. Heinlein: What school did he go to?

E. Drews: He [Reynold Drews] went to Rutgers.

O. Drews: Rutgers College.

D. Heinlein: He went to Rutgers College?

O. Drews: And then to—

E. Drew: Harvard Law [School].

O. Drews: Harvard Law. He's a lawyer; he was private. He was a private lawyer of Jack Chrysler.

D. Heinlein: At who? At where?

O. Drews: Jack Chrysler's lawyer.

D. Heinlein: Jack Chrysler?

O. Drews: Lawyer.

D. Heinlein: Who was he?

E. Drews: Jack Chrysler⁴?

D. Heinlein: I don't know him.

O. Drews: Chrysler Corporation.

D. Heinlein: Oh! Oh, I see. I see.

⁴ John Forker "Jack" Chrysler Jr. was the son of Walter Chrysler, the founder of the Chrysler Corporation in 1925. Jack Chrysler owned Chrysler Aviation in Van Nuys, California and died in 1958.

E. Drews: **Until he died, and then he was with the Irving Trust Company [investment bank].**

O. Drews: **Yeah, Irving Trust; [he was] one of the officers in Irving Trust. He now lives in Kennebunkport, Maine.**

D. Heinlein: I see, I see. Do you go up to see him at all?

O. Drews: **No, he comes down to see me. Too far to walk. [laughs]**

E. Drews: **Well, Mr. Drews has emphysema and he had a tank of oxygen in the bedroom. And every morning, he has to take the oxygen. And therefore, we don't go anywhere overnight anymore. Because when [Edward] Allen Burroughs [Jr.] was alive, I asked Allen about those portable oxygen tanks and he told me you cannot rely on them. And I noticed a man who lived in [unclear], Edward Stein [phonetic], had his heart attack and his wife was [unclear] giving his oxygen and it didn't work. And consequently, he died before the ambulance got there.**

D. Heinlein: I'm sorry to hear that.

E. Drews: **Well, that was quite a while ago.**

O. Drews: **My emphysema came from smoking too much.**

D. Heinlein: I see, yeah. I have a friend who used to be caretaker for a school, and he also smoked a great deal and consequently has emphysema. Well, Mr. Drews, what were your interests and what are your interests now? Crossword puzzles?

O. Drews: **Crossword puzzles and reading.**

D. Heinlein: And reading?

O. Drews: **Yeah.**

D. Heinlein: What reading do you do?

E. Drews: **Mostly whodunits.**

D. Heinlein: [reading from book cover] "Great stories of mystery and suspense." I see. I'm looking at a—Mr. Drews just handed me a book, quite thick, and he's presently reading this book. How long will it take you to read this book?

O. Drews: **All depends. I do other work besides the walk.**

D. Heinlein: You walk?

O. Drews: **I take a mile walk in the morning, mile in the afternoon if I can get it. That's three [unclear; coughing].**

D. Heinlein: So you worked as an accountant and timekeeper during the construction of the bridge.

O. Drews: And purchasing agent.

D. Heinlein: And purchasing agent. For eighteen years, you were working on the Pennsylvania Railroad as what?

O. Drews: My title was NW&S clerk in charge of the maintenance, repair station track, and so forth.

D. Heinlein: So you must have had a number of men under you?

E. Drews: You had men under you?

O. Drews: No, no.

D. Heinlein: No?

O. Drews: I had charge of the master carpenter, telephone people, and everybody else. All except the engineers and firemen.

E. Drews: Well, you did have people under you though?

O. Drews: Oh yeah.

D. Heinlein: Yeah, that's what I meant. I see. Where was your office?

O. Drews: Jersey City.

D. Heinlein: I see, I see. And did you take the train to Jersey City or did you drive to Jersey City?

O. Drews: No. I had a pass on the railroad. I had a pass on the entire system.

D. Heinlein: Um-hm. Anywhere in the country?

O. Drews: East of Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania] and—I mean east of St. Louis [Missouri] and Chicago [Illinois].

D. Heinlein: Did you use that pass a lot?

O. Drews: No. The only time I use it was vacation, maybe going down to Florida. I took a pass on other railroads by applying for them. Just trip passes.

D. Heinlein: Right, right. What kind of a town was Metuchen, oh, say around 1920, when you started work? Was it 1920 that you started work on the School Board?

O. Drews: **Yeah, I didn't live in Metuchen then. I lived in, called [59] Robins Place in Metuchen**

D. Heinlein: Robins Place, I've heard of that, yeah.

O. Drews: **And right across the way from me [at 76 Robins Place] was Lew Compton⁵, assistant secretary of the Navy. And [George S.] Silzer⁶, governor, lived here and the senator lived on Spring Street [actually at 79 Graham Avenue, north of Spring Street].**

D. Heinlein: In Metuchen?

O. Drews: **Yeah.**

D. Heinlein: Spring Street? Is that near the center of Metuchen?

E. Drews: **Who?**

D. Heinlein: Spring Street.

E. Drews: **It's off Graham [Avenue].**

D. Heinlein: Off Graham, I see. If we look at a map, we would be able to find it?

E. Drews: **Oh yes.**

D. Heinlein: Okay, okay.

O. Drews: **They had two fire departments at that time. Right next to the drug store [Metuchen Pharmacy] on corner of Station Place and Main Street and owned by [Edward Allen] Burroughs, next to that was the Eagle Hook and Ladder [Fire Company at 398 Main Street]. And Washington Hose [Company] is over on [505] Middlesex Avenue.**

D. Heinlein: Right. I know that building where Washington Hose is.

O. Drews: **Yeah. And the borough councilors to meet at Frank Smith's barber shop on Main Street, which is now part of [Drake's] Middlesex Hardware [at 395 Main Street].**

D. Heinlein: I see, I see. Where did the Board of Ed meet?

O. Drews: **Who?**

⁵ Born in Perth Amboy, Lewis Compton was an officer in the United States Navy during World War I. From 1940 to 1941, Compton served as assistant secretary of the Navy.

⁶ George Sebastian Silzer was born in New Brunswick and was a member from Middlesex County of the New Jersey Senate from 1907 to 1912. He served as Governor of New Jersey from 1923 to 1926. He was appointed chairman of the New York Port Authority from 1926 to 1928.

D. Heinlein: The Board of Education.

O. Drews: In Franklin School.

D. Heinlein: Oh, at Franklin School. How many people were on the Board?

O. Drews: I think there were at least seven or nine. Seven, I think.

D. Heinlein: Seven people.

O. Drews: At that time.

D. Heinlein: Yeah. And how many schools were there in Metuchen at that time?

O. Drews: There was the Franklin School, the Edgar School, and the—

E. Drews: It's the Moss School now.

O. Drews: Moss School. And one other—Spring Street, what was that?

E. Drews: That's Edgar [School].

O. Drews: Edgar, yeah.

E. Drews: Edgar.

O. Drews: Edgars.

E. Drews: Edgar!

D. Heinlein: Edgar.

O. Drews: Yes.

D. Heinlein: So there were four schools?

E. Drews: Four schools.

O. Drews: There were five. There's one on—

E. Drews: Can't be.

O. Drews: Edgar is on Spring [Edgar School is located at 49 Brunswick Avenue]. This is off Main [Street], back of the—

E. Drews: That's the Franklin [School].

O. Drews: Franklin, yeah. That's the one, yeah.

D. Heinlein: So there were five schools?

O. Drews: Five schools, yeah.

E. Drews: Edgar, Franklin, I've forgotten what the Moss School used to be called.

O. Drews: Moss? That was Washington School at that time.

E. Drews: Well, Edgar, Franklin—

D. Heinlein: Franklin, Moss.

E. Drews: Moss and there's only—the only other one that there is now is the high school [at 400 Grove Avenue]. And that wasn't built in those days.

O. Drews: That wasn't there; no high schools at that time.

E. Drews: There were only three that I know of.

D. Heinlein: Okay. I can check in the records and see if there are any more⁷. Edgar, Franklin, and Moss.

O. Drews: [offhand comment] Do you think that this, raise that now?

E. Drews: Oh yes, I didn't think of that. The reason we use these banded tablecloths is because we play cards and I tried everything else. And finally decided [if] we play cards, we are going to have to use this kind of tablecloth.

D. Heinlein: I see. So at the present time, you're doing walking and reading a lot and playing cards.

E. Drews: And his crosswords.

D. Heinlein: And doing the crossword puzzles. Do you have certain friends and colleagues in Metuchen that you visit and see?

E. Drews: Not anymore.

D. Heinlein: No?

O. Drews: No. I take walks around here and back.

D. Heinlein: I see, I see.

⁷ The Metuchen schools consist of three different Franklin Schools: the first one built ca. 1807 and is the present-day Borough Improvement League building, the second one built ca. 1873 and later demolished, and the third one built ca. 1907 and demolished in 1999. The elementary schools consist of Edgar School (built in 1907), Washington School / Mildred B. Moss School (built in 1927), and Campbell School (built in 1950). The present-day high school at 400 Grove Avenue was opened in 1958.

- E. Drews:** Most of our friends are retired and moved away or they're not well.
- O. Drews:** Or they've passed away.
- E. Drews:** Or they've passed away certainly.
- D. Heinlein: Yeah, yeah. Do you have just one son?
- E. Drews:** Yes, it's my stepson. This is not my son. He's my stepson.
- O. Drew:** Yeah, one son.
- D. Heinlein: I see, I see.
- E. Drews:** I have no children.
- O. Drews:** His name is Reynold.
- D. Heinlein: Reynold?
- O. Drews:** Yeah, Reynold Drews.
- D. Heinlein: Are there any particular incidents or occurrences which you remember strongly from your time in Metuchen?
- E. Drews:** Well, the fire in the Franklin School.
- O. Drews:** Yeah, the fire in the Franklin School⁸.
- D. Heinlein: When was that?
- E. Drews:** That was twenty years ago.
- O. Drews:** Yeah. And Metuchen then had two stations [for the Pennsylvania Railroad]: Metuchen [Railroad Station] and Robinvale [Railroad Station] on Grove Avenue.
- D. Heinlein: Two railroad stations, uh-huh?
- O. Drews:** Yeah.
- E. Drews:** Well, I can remember when I lived on the house on the corner of Middlesex [Avenue] and Grove [Avenue], the house with the white fence around it [at 280

⁸ On September 26, 1957, the front section of the Franklin School building at the corner of Middlesex Avenue and Center Street was heavily damaged by fire forcing the district to send its high school students to Perth Amboy. In 1958, a new high school was opened along Grove Avenue and the Franklin School was rehabilitated and converted to a middle school until 1985. Franklin School was demolished in 1999.

Grove Avenue]. That must have been thirty, forty years ago. And Middlesex Avenue was called Dark Lane. Not Middlesex Avenue, Grove Avenue.

O. Drews: **Grove Avenue!**

E. Drews: **Was Dark Lane and there were only about six houses. And there was a railroad workers camp there near the railroad.**

D. Heinlein: This was a railroad worker camp on Dark Lane [Grove Avenue], right? I see. The workers were repairing the tracks?

E. Drews: **Yes.**

O. Drews: **And the trolley went to Perth Amboy-New Brunswick and it branched from there to the upper end of Main Street.**

D. Heinlein: To the upper end of Main Street? I see. The trolley.

E. Drews: **But I remember coming on the Perth Amboy [trolley] when I was a child and I can remember coming—**

O. Drews: **You can transfer from there [Amboy Avenue] up to the upper end [of Main Street].**

E. Drews: **And we used to—one of my sisters had a friend who lived—it seems to me there was a house⁹ where the post office is now [at 360 Main Street].**

D. Heinlein: I see.

O. Drews: **Yeah, there was.**

E. Drews: **And we used to come by trolley to visit there.**

O. Drews: **What was her name? The one that built that post office, that did that excavation that took the dirt over to Washington School to throw in the marshes.**

D. Heinlein: I see, I see.

O. Drews: **Yeah. That was Washington [School], the back end of it was all marshes.**

D. Heinlein: When was Washington School built?

O. Drews: **Hmm.**

D. Heinlein: When was the school built?

⁹ The former Alexander Ayers house was located at the southeast corner of Woodbridge Avenue and Main Street during the early twentieth century. It was demolished sometime between 1910 and 1920.

O. Drews: **Washington? I can't remember that.**

D. Heinlein: Yeah, I don't know myself. But there was a marsh on the side of the school?

O. Drews: **Yeah, on the Moss side of it.**

D. Heinlein: Okay. Do you have anything in particular that you would like people to know about yourself?

O. Drews: **No, nothing particular. Just my age.**

D. Heinlein: How old are you?

O. Drews: **Ninety-three.**

D. Heinlein: Ninety-three.

E. Drews: **In July.**

D. Heinlein: In July, I see.

O. Drews: **Yes, be ninety-four next July.**

D. Heinlein: Oh, ninety-four next July. Well, are you going to live to be a hundred?

O. Drews: **I don't know. It's up to the Lord.**

D. Heinlein: Up to the Lord, I see.

O. Drews: **As long as I have my health okay.**

D. Heinlein: Okay. Well, you're walking every day two miles.

O. Drews: **Yup. I'll take mine after [unclear], the mile.**

E. Drews: **He goes to the Acme [Market at 470 Main Street] sometimes twice a day. See I've had two cataract operations and my internist says I'm anemic because of the last operation that I had [unclear] in the hospital. Of course, if you've been in the hospital you know that the food is rotten.**

D. Heinlein: That's terrible.

E. Drews: **And I only weighed ninety-eight pounds when I went in and lost ten. And the doctor says that I am anemic and when I told this to the ophthalmologist, he said that's why you are having trouble with your eyes. Right now, they're watery. I just used drops and blinking, and I'm having difficulty seeing. And I'm afraid to**

cross that road because I have to stop driving because of the cataract. And shortly thereafter, Mr. Drews decided he wouldn't want to drive any longer.

D. Heinlein: I see. So does Mr. Drews do the shopping?

E. Drews: He does most of the shopping. I go to the butcher. We use a butcher in Bonhamtown [Edison]. I tried all the independent ones around until finally I found this one. And about every two weeks, I go there and stock up.

D. Heinlein: I see. Do you go to church on Sunday?

E. Drews: I am Catholic. I no longer regularly attend because I have this intestinal condition that very distressing, never knowing just what's going to happen. But the priest comes here, and I make the contributions to church. And I'm still in the religion. Mr. Drews used to go occasionally with me.

D. Heinlein: Well, I don't think I have anything else to ask you right now. I'd like to try and take a picture if I could. Would that be all right?

E. Drews: A picture of Mr. Drews?

D. Heinlein: And you.

E. Drews: Oh! [laughs] Well, I'm hardly subject for a picture when I'm not dressed for that, but it's perfectly all right with me!

D. Heinlein: Okay, I'll try and get one set up. Thank you for the interview.

E. Drews: Well, you're welcome.

D. Heinlein: Thank you very much for doing this.

O. Drews: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]