

Elsie Potter

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Interviewer: Paula Bruno
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, March 2005 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, January 2020
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Abstract: Elsie Mook (Burroughs) Potter (1889-1980) was the daughter of Edward Allen Burroughs and Mary Ann “Mamie” Mook, and the sister of Ruth (Burroughs) Eby and Edward Allen Burroughs Jr. Ms. Potter was born and raised in Metuchen living in several residences along Amboy Avenue and Middlesex Avenue during her childhood. Her father was a building contractor and the borough clerk of Metuchen, and her brother was the long-time pharmacist at Metuchen Pharmacy.

Ms. Potter graduated from Franklin School and was an active member of the Dutch Reformed Church. She married Dr. Francis Marmaduke Potter in 1915 in her family home at 407 Middlesex Avenue. Her husband was the first Rhodes Scholar from Rutgers University, the former deacon of the Dutch Reformed Church, the secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church of America, and the president of Voorhees College in Vellore, India. Ms. Potter accompanied her husband on missionary work in India for two years shortly following their marriage. They subsequently returned to Metuchen and resided at 129 Hillside Avenue, although they briefly revisited India in 1938. Ms. Potter’s husband died in 1952 after years of poor health. They had a total of three children: Rev. Francis Edward (former minister of the Congregational Church of Plainfield), Allen Marmaduke (actor and soap opera producer), and Elsie June (singer). Ms. Potter is buried with her family at Hillside Cemetery.

During this interview, Ms. Potter primarily discusses her family and her childhood memories of Metuchen. She talks extensively about her experience living in India with her husband as part of his missionary work at Voorhees College, and she also reminisces about Joyce Kilmer, who she dated as a young woman.

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P. Bruno: Today is November 30, 1977 and I’m interviewing Mrs. Elsie Potter of Metuchen, New Jersey. [recording paused]

All right. See the tape is going around, I don’t know if you can see it.

E. Potter: Well, I know how they work, yes.

P. Bruno: I’m almost sure it’s going to work this time. All right, and I have to speak up now. And this is on. [laughter]

Okay, I think we can start. All right. Let's start a little bit about your parents and your parents' friends that you were telling me about.

E. Potter: Oh yes. Well, my parents—I can remember way back when I was a tiny little girl, really tiny. [laughs] And they belonged to a club, a bridge club, and they met around at one another's homes. And I can remember them coming to my home and playing bridge and [I] being allowed to sit up and stay for a little while, probably till the refreshments were over. [laughs] And then they would stand around the piano and sing. And so many of those couples were the parents of my friends, and that is true of the present day.

P. Bruno: And can you remember some of the names for me?

E. Potter: Well, Dr. Dana and Mrs. Dana, and Mr. & Mrs. Pates [phonetic], Mr. & Mrs. Harry Johnson, Mr. & Mrs. Spear. They just come to my mind offhand.

P. Bruno: And are most of these—are their children, do you know, still living in Metuchen?

E. Potter: Yes, yes, well not the Spears. They're not here any longer. But the children have all through the years been living there and belong to clubs that I belong to.

P. Bruno: Yeah, like the bridge club you were talking about.

E. Potter: Yes, what we used to call the Evening Bridge Club, that was the sons and daughters of those [members]. That went on for about thirty-five years. Now we don't have that anymore because it's sad to say, but practically every one of the men are dead. All of the wives are living but most—I think all of them, almost all of them are living. But all the men are gone.

P. Bruno: Yeah, men usually—I mean women usually live better than the men.

E. Potter: It's unusual. So many of my friends are living as I do, alone, because their husbands are all gone.

P. Bruno: Yeah. So what about your parents and their background? Like where were they from before they came to Metuchen?

E. Potter: Well, my father [Edward Allen Burroughs] was from—I didn't know so much about him because he was from the West¹. But my mother [Mary Ann "Mamie" (Mook) Burroughs] had been a New York girl. And her family moved out here to Metuchen because of her father's health. They moved out to the country before she was married. And we lived and I was born—she was married shortly after that, my father came back here. We lived in a house that is now burned down, but stood exactly on the spot where the Acme [Supermarket] Store is now [formerly located along Amboy Avenue near the Metuchen boundary line].

P. Bruno: Oh wow.

¹ According to census records, Edward Allen Burroughs is identified as being born in either Delaware or Kentucky. His parents' places of birth are listed as either Illinois, New York, Delaware, or New Jersey.

- E. Potter:** On Amboy Avenue, right on that very spot. And there's a road [Pierson Avenue] that runs up the side of it. I don't know if you would know about it.
- P. Bruno: No, I'm not familiar with the road.
- E. Potter:** Well, I notice it because I can remember as a tiny little girl my grandmother walking me up that road and way up into the field to pick blackberries.
- P. Bruno: Oh wow.
- E. Potter:** I often think I'd like to drive the car up there, but I don't know what's at the end of it now. [laughs]
- P. Bruno: So did your parents meet in Metuchen?
- E. Potter:** Yes. So then they met in Metuchen and they were married in that house [on Amboy Avenue], and I was born in that house. And then I lived there until I was about four years old only. And then my father bought a house on what is now Middlesex Avenue, but it's not there any longer. It was torn down and smaller houses put up [along Stirling Court]. But it had been used by the White Sisters, the Catholic nuns that had a home². Do you remember? You wouldn't [unclear] know that.
- P. Bruno: No, I wouldn't remember.
- E. Potter:** Well, it was a large house and we lived there. And then my father was always building new houses. In fact, that's what he did; he was sort of a contractor in his own business.
- P. Bruno: In the Metuchen area?
- E. Potter:** Yes, yes, right here in Metuchen. So then he sold that house and built the house next to it [at 335 Middlesex Avenue], which I was telling you about before, the one with the big pillars. And I lived there practically all my teenager and growing up days. Well, I lived there for many years and then he finally sold that and built the house [at 407 Middlesex Avenue] that's down on the corner of Rector Street and Middlesex Avenue, opposite the [St. Luke's] Episcopal Church. And I lived there for about five years and then I was married.
- P. Bruno: Okay, now which one of those houses is called the Edgar house?
- E. Potter:** The [Harold T.] Edgar³ house is the one with the big white—
- P. Bruno: —with the pillars.
- E. Potter:** We sold it to someone, to Mr. & Mrs. [George C.] Williams. And the Williams sold it to the Edgars.

² The house was located directly opposite of the Woodwild Park gates at 319 Middlesex Avenue. The residence was later used as a convent for the White Sisters (officially known as the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa).

³ Harold T. Edgar was the president of the Edgar Plastic Kaolin Company, also known as the Edgar Brothers Clay Company.

P. Bruno: And why do you think that it's known as the Edgar house?

E. Potter: Well, because they were the last people that owned it until just—I don't know long the present owners have had it, but we always referred to it later and people did as the Edgar house. But actually, my father built it and I grew up there.

P. Bruno: And that was the one that you were the hostess at the Christmas party?

E. Potter: Yes, yes, that was the one. I was there. And that was the one where I lived there when I told you the story of the stagecoach.

P. Bruno: Oh, tell me it again.

E. Potter: Oh, well, the stagecoach! There was a millionaire family in New York, one of the many—well not as many as now [chuckles]—but the millionaires we knew in New York (knew of) and his name was Mr. Hyde. And this was—it was a social affair. Every week or every other week, I've forgotten how often, he would drive a stagecoach with four horses from New York to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and invite all his friends for this ride. And they sat up on the top of the coach, and a coachman driving these four horses, and at the back of the coach on the top was a man blowing a bugle. Every so often you'd hear it and it got so that we would watch for it on Tuesdays. And it would pass our house about noontime and we were told that they came out as far as, I think it was either Rahway or Iselin, and then there they stopped and changed horses. Then they went on to New Brunswick and then changed horses. Then they went on to Trenton and changed horses, and finally ended up in Philadelphia. And then they came back on Fridays and we always watched for them and listened for the bugle to blow. [chuckles] And it was really quite a gala affair, it really was. It was purely social, you see. That was one thing I always remembered at that house.

In the other house, the one that the White Sisters lived in finally, I lived in that house when I was so tiny and that was where I saw the first automobile go through Metuchen.

P. Bruno: Oh yeah, tell me about that.

E. Potter: Yes, I'd forgotten about that.

P. Bruno: What did it look like?

E. Potter: Oh, it was just a little one-seated—I think it was a Maxwell⁴; that was the name of it, the make. And it was just a little one-seated affair and it went along, and we called it a horseless carriage. [laughs] And everybody ran to the fence to look at it.

P. Bruno: So it was unexpected?

E. Potter: At that time, it was unexpected. We saw it and we just yelled and ran to the [fence]; so that's what I remember in that house. Then in what we called the Edgar house—really wasn't, it was our house—I remember the stagecoach. And then finally when we moved, when I lived in the house opposite the Episcopal Church, from which I

⁴ The Maxwell automobile was manufactured in the United States from ca. 1904 to 1925.

was married, the last house I lived in there, was where I saw the first airplane go over. [laughs] I can remember that was unexpected too!

P. Bruno: And what did that look like?

E. Potter: Well, it looked like—you've seen pictures of those with the two wings out, [gesturing] you know like that. And we heard it. We were sitting at the breakfast table and we heard this queer noise in the sky, sounded queer to us. And actually, it wasn't like the noise you hear now of an airplane. And we ran out in the backyard and here this thing was flying over and we saw the man sitting up there. [chuckles] And I was never so thrilled in all my life! And then later on we heard that another one was coming from New York and all the children—we weren't children then, I was a young woman in my twenties—we went up to what we called Peck's Hill. That's up at—oh, what did they call it right up here now? Well anyway, we watched toward New York to watch it coming. From about around about Rahway, we could see it coming and that was the second time.

P. Bruno: Was it very low or was it high in the sky?

E. Potter: Oh, it was low compared to what they are now. Oh yes, you could see it all very plainly because now they go thousands of feet high. But I remember that; it really was a thrill. And that I remember. Well, then I was married and I went to India.

P. Bruno: Yeah, tell me a little bit about that.

E. Potter: Well, I don't know what to tell you. [laughs]

P. Bruno: Well, let's back up a minute. Let's go back to your school days and social events in Metuchen when you were growing up. Now did you go to the Franklin School?

E. Potter: First I went to a kindergarten school (a private school) over the other side of town. And then after the fourth grade—I know I went into the fourth grade when I came to Franklin School. But it was the old building [built in 1870, later moved to New Street]; it wasn't this building. And I went there through three years of high school. That was all they had. They didn't have a fourth year. I guess they didn't have room for it. And so after, everybody graduated when there were three years. And some of my classmates went on and went down to Perth Amboy or over to New Brunswick and finished, but I didn't. And then they put on—immediately after that, they built the new school [in 1909]. It was new then, and [they] added the fourth year. And then I went back and had the fourth year afterward. [chuckles]

P. Bruno: Were you the first class to go back to the fourth year?

E. Potter: I think so, the first one at the—I just went one year more, just finished my fourth year.

P. Bruno: Why didn't you want to continue in New Brunswick or Perth Amboy?

E. Potter: Oh, I don't know. I guess my parents just didn't think it necessary or something. But anyway, I didn't. Some did; they didn't all do it, but a few of the girls did and I didn't. So then I married and I went to India.

P. Bruno: How long—you met your husband [Dr. Francis Marmaduke Potter] in Metuchen, right?

E. Potter: Well, he was one of the pupils at that kindergarten! [laughs] I knew him all my life. I had known him, but I never had—

P. Bruno: But you didn't go to the same schools before?

E. Potter: No, he didn't go very long. He went to a prep school in New Brunswick and then on to college. And oh, he didn't go to Metuchen school. In fact, all during my growing up years, I didn't really have too much to do with him. I knew him, but you know we weren't intimate until just fairly before he went to India and then he went to India—

P. Bruno: Now when was that?

E. Potter: He went to India about 1913 and he was in India two years and came back and we were married [on June 29, 1915] and then back [to India] in 1915. Then I was there two years, and then we had to come back because of his health. He was very, very sick in India. Actually, he was when he came back to be married but no one realized how ill he was. He couldn't live in the tropics. Some people can't. I could, but it didn't agree with him at all.

P. Bruno: So tell me about—you told me that he was a missionary in India—and tell me about your life in India for two years.

E. Potter: Well, I don't know how to tell you. [chuckles] It was living the life of [large exhale]; I just had such a big beautiful big home and all everybody does—I mean we call Europeans, there were Americans, but everybody of another race we call Europeans—and loads of servants. I didn't have a thing to do, which was sort of too bad in a way. [chuckles]

P. Bruno: What did you do to keep busy during the day?

E. Potter: Well, read, lots of social events, plenty of dinner parties every night, and we belonged to the club (the English clubs). See the English were in India at that time.

P. Bruno: Were there a lot of English people in India in the area that you were?

E. Potter: Yes, yes, yes. And we'd go to the English Club after tea every afternoon and play tennis and all that. And then there were always dinner parties. So that was the way of entertaining, not so much dancing the way they do here—well, it was too hot, you know that time—but entertaining at dinner or having them at our house or going to other houses. And it was hard in the hot weather (what we call the hot weather). Of course, it's always hot, but from April on—April, May, June, and July—are the really hot months. Then we'd go up into the hills (what we call the hills); the hills were 8,000 feet high! [laughs] And that's the south of India. Of course, in the north it's very, very much higher. But I guess they were far higher than anything in this country, east of the Rockies [mountain range]. And we were carried up in those days on a—four men with a litter, two poles with a canvas.

P. Bruno: Oh, I've seen those in movies.

E. Potter: Yes, we were carried up. The road up that they carried you was twelve miles long. But when I came down, I drove down. We came down in a car and that's thirty-five miles long coming down.

P. Bruno: Oh.

E. Potter: Because they wind, you know. It was very steep. So up there, up in the hills, it was quite different. It was just like out [here]; it was all pine trees and lakes just like a temperate zone, like it is here.

P. Bruno: Now when you went to the mountains, you just went with your husband? Or did other friends join you?

E. Potter: Yes. Well actually, he didn't go. I went up early with friends because at that time I was expecting my baby in August [1916] and they wanted me not to be down on the plains during the hottest weather. So I went up and stayed with them until he [her husband] could [come]. He couldn't come up until college closed, you see. And he came up and then actually he came up and then had his vacation and went back again to the plains. And then I came down with friends shortly before the baby was born. The baby was born down on the plains (what we call the plains). But that's why I happened to be up there so long, because of that.

P. Bruno: So tell me a little bit about your husband's work and what he did in India.

E. Potter: Well, he—it would be just like a college president here. He was the—they call it the principal, but he was really the president of the college.

P. Bruno: Oh, I thought it was more missionary?

E. Potter: Well, it is. It's a mission college run by the missionaries, but he was the president of it.

P. Bruno: And did he teach there?

E. Potter: He taught two subjects, which is unusual for the president, but it's a little different there. He taught Bible and English (those two subjects) and was the college president.

P. Bruno: Did a lot of English students go to that college or was there more Indians?

E. Potter: No, all Indians, I think. I don't know whether there were any, there might have been. But more apt when the English child got to college age, they'd go home to go to college. It's really a very fine college, I mean scholastically. Actually, young people in their teens are apt to go home; they send them home at that time.

P. Bruno: Do you remember the name of this school?

E. Potter: Oh yes, Voorhees, V-o-o-r-h-e-e-s. Voorhees College. It's named after the same woman⁵ that Voorhees Chapel over at—

⁵ Voorhees College in Vellore, India is named after its benefactors, Ralph and Elizabeth Voorhees from the Reformed Church of America.

P. Bruno: At Douglass [Residential College; part of Rutgers University]. Yeah, I went to Douglass.

E. Potter: Did you? Well, Voorhees Chapel was named after—she [Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees] gave the money for Voorhees Chapel, the same woman that endowed the money for Voorhees College in India.

P. Bruno: Wow. Was she from—then she was from—?

E. Potter: No. It's funny, I never met the woman, but whenever my husband while he was in India, when he came home, he would go to see her. She would correspond with him all the time and want to keep up on news of the college so when he would come home, he would go to see her sometimes. And she lived in Clinton, New Jersey if you know where that is. It's up beyond Somerville.

P. Bruno: It's north of here.

E. Potter: Yes, north of here, not too far beyond Somerville. And we used to smile about it because she was the most unassuming little elderly lady. And you'd ring the doorbell and she'd come to the door in her little white apron. And she'd want to know what was necessary and what they needed and so on, and she'd get her checkbook and sit down and write a check for a \$100,000! Oh, she was a tremendously wealthy woman, and yet she lived there in the simple piece at the simplest little house you ever saw and the most unsophisticated little elderly woman. And her name was Mrs. Voorhees and she—it was, that college, I don't suppose she gave all the money to found it. But probably in the very beginning, years back, she must have given a terrible lot because it was named for her: Voorhees College and so is the Chapel at Douglass.

P. Bruno: Was there any specific reason why she chose to find a college in India?

E. Potter: Well, she was very missionary-minded and she belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, that's the Dutch Reformed College. And aside from that, I never heard of her until after I was married. I guess very few people have, but I know it's the same woman that Voorhees College was named after.

P. Bruno: That's very interesting to know.

E. Potter: Voorhees Chapel at Douglass, yeah. I presume she must be gone now because that was quite a few years.

P. Bruno: Is the college still in existence?

E. Potter: Oh my, yes. Very much so, yeah. Oh, very much so. Yes, it was a very fine college really.

P. Bruno: So whereabouts in India was it?

E. Potter: Vellore, V-e-l-l-o-r-e. Vellore, South India. The nearest big city was Madras [also known as Chennai] in the South.

P. Bruno: And did you live in Vellore?

- E. Potter:** Yes, I lived in Vellore. It was a city about what we could call a small—like New Brunswick would be or about that size, maybe Elizabeth or something. Not a big city like New York, not like a big city for India. But it was so different, everything. Just I couldn't explain it to you really. [chuckles]
- P. Bruno: Do you remember like any sort of one incident or one event that happened that sort of sticks out in your mind?
- E. Potter:** Oh, different things there. Oh well, the home life. Oh, the servants were so wonderful and we used to smile because they loved any excuse for a little festivity. And if it was your wedding anniversary or your birthday, how they knew it, I don't know. [laughs] They did the same thing, you'd come in—sometimes it would be breakfast, sometimes it would be lunch, sometimes it would be teatime—but anyway, you'd come into the dining room and there wouldn't be any chair at your place at the table. Then Master, Mr. Potter would say, Master would say, "Paramo [phonetic]," to the butler, "where is Mrs.' chair?" This went on every time, same thing. Then Paramo [phonetic] would run out in the back porch and scream at the other servants, "Where is Mrs.' chair? Get Mrs.' chair!" So then pretty soon in from the back porch coming carrying the chair like a throne, it would be a chair about the size of that with a back to it.
- P. Bruno: A really big chair.
- E. Potter:** Completely covered with roses and jasmine and flowers.
- P. Bruno: Oh, how beautiful.
- E. Potter:** Not just covered, but you know you see pictures of the flower parade (the Rose Bowl Parade [Rose Parade]) made out of every one—they'd be sewed on—a complete throne of flowers! And pulled from the seat for us. Then that would be maybe a birthday, then pretty soon it would be Master's birthday. Come in—maybe that time it would be lunchtime—no chair for Master! "Paramo [phonetic]? Where is the Master's chair?" [laughs] Then they go around hollering, "What happened to Master's chair?" Looking all over, probably they'd been two days doing it. And then out on the porch or somewhere hidden out back, in they'd come (two or three of them) toting this huge—they'd get a big chair. I mean chose one of the big chairs completely covered with flowers, you know put up the mast—isn't that lovely—every slightest little excuse! As I say, wedding anniversary, every birthday, I don't know how they knew when the birthdays came.
- And I know when I came home from the hospital with my new baby carrying, the doctor drove me home in an automobile and he drove up under our porte-cochere that went out from the front door to the porch. The porch was about as wide as this room is long, and then steps down.
- P. Bruno: Oh wow.
- E. Potter:** Yes. Each step would be about as wide as that couch, but only about this high [gesturing]. They had rugs and carpets that [were] taken from all over the place and put end to end out across the porch, down the steps, red carpet all the way out to the car with flowers on each side. You'd have thought it was the President—oh, more

than the President of the United States—coming home for me to get out and bring the baby. And the butler, the old guy, he came out to the car and took the new baby in his hands. And they have a word for the first boy baby: Baba, B-a-b-a. Baba was the first boy baby. And he said, “Baba Dear.” And from that day till this, we call him Baba Dear. I’ve never called him anything else. And he’s now in his sixties, just had his sixtieth birthday. [laughs] And growing up through high school all his friends called him Baba, they left off the Dear. But he’s always been known as Baba, Baba Potter.

P. Bruno: And what’s his name?

E. Potter: His name is Francis Edward. We’ve never in the family and close friends have never called him anything but Baba. Still call him Baba. [laughs] And that was where it came from. By the time his brother [Allen Marmaduke Potter] was born three years later, we were home then [in Metuchen]. So if he’d been in India, he would have been “tong-bee” [phonetic].

P. Bruno: That’s the second one?

E. Potter: That’s the second one. So he was home then. But Baba, we’ve always called my son “Baba”; never called him anything else. [chuckles]

P. Bruno: So you were two years in India?

E. Potter: Two years in India.

P. Bruno: And then you returned back to—

E. Potter: Then after that we came home [to Metuchen]. And when we first came home, we didn’t own a home or anything. We lived for a few months with my parents and for a few months with my husband’s parents while this house [at 129 Hillside Avenue] was being built.

P. Bruno: Where were your parents living at in Metuchen?

E. Potter: They were living where I was married from, in the house [at 407 Middlesex Avenue] on the corner opposite the Episcopal Church.

P. Bruno: Oh, okay.

E. Potter: See? And then while there, we had this house built and I’ve lived here ever since.

P. Bruno: Oh, how nice. This is a really nice house.

E. Potter: I’ve lived here fifty some years. Kind of silly now that I’m all by myself, but it’s not so big.

P. Bruno: No, it’s a real cozy home.

E. Potter: Well, that’s about all I know to tell you.

P. Bruno: Well, how about—now you got back by ship, right?

E. Potter: Oh yes, ship. Took us ten years [weeks].

P. Bruno: Why don't you tell me about your adventures on the high seas?

E. Potter: Fortunately, we didn't. But we could have because when I went (when I went to India), I told you I had to go across the Pacific [Ocean] instead of the Atlantic [Ocean] because England was in the First World War. England was fighting and the English ships were being sunk on the Atlantic and we just didn't take any chances going across that. So we went across the Pacific and that took us because I always traveled in war times it seems, because of the war times. We went across to Hong Kong, but I was quite a while getting there because first we went to Japan, spent a little while there with friends of my husband, and then on to the Philippines and then finally to Hong Kong. And there we had to change to another ship, but we had to change to an English ship and England had all her big ships were carrying troops they field in war with Germany. So we got on a—oh, a terrible old, this only thing—you just got what you could—just a miserable ship. And that took us on to Ceylon [Sri Lanka] where we got off and then crossed over to India, just ferried right across and then up to India.

And when we came home—I think I told you this before—the English were wondering when we were going to come into the war. So when we came home, we came as far as—I remember we had to stay in Colombo in Hong Kong for days. We didn't know when the ship was going to sail because they were sinking the ships all the time (the British ships) and we were on a British ship. They had the minesweepers that went out of the harbor ahead of every ship to check for mines for safety's sake. So you had to wait until the minesweepers went out until they said you might go. So we stayed there quite a while and then went on out and got to Hong Kong. And then we changed to another ship that brought us into Canada, Vancouver. We went up way north almost to—

P. Bruno: How long did it take you?

E. Potter: Ten weeks. Ten weeks with a new baby! [laughs]

P. Bruno: Oh, that must have been dreadful.

E. Potter: That was during the war. But as I say, coming home, on the way home, on the Pacific, we got the news that America had entered the war. And then by the time I got home, we were in the war. Then of course—this aside from this—in later years my husband and my little daughter (she was a little girl, ten years old then), we went back to India [in 1938]. He had to go on [to] India, and that was while we were on the way, we got into the Second World War! [laughs] So they used to say if there was any doubt about a war, just start me going somewhere before I go home. [laughter]

P. Bruno: What kind of a ship was it? Was it a large ship?

E. Potter: Oh, beautiful ships. Oh yes, yes, I will say that.

P. Bruno: And they had like accommodations for you and your sons?

E. Potter: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, the ships were beautiful. All the ships that I was ever on except in that one little one that I said from [Hong Kong]—yes, oh yes.

P. Bruno: And they were passenger ships?

E. Potter: Oh yes, yes. On that little one we took out of San Francisco [California] when I first went—I can't remember, it was a beautiful ship. And then coming home as I remember, all the ships I was ever on were always beautiful ships, everything just—I guess just as nice as now because I've been on ships to see friends off and all the ships I've traveled on were always just lovely, beautiful. I suppose there must have been something different, but it didn't seem that different to me.

P. Bruno: So when you came back home the first time after you had been in India for two years, what did your husband do?

E. Potter: Well, he was already—he had planned to be a missionary. So he wanted to go on in that work if he could. And at first for about a year, he taught the prep school (Rutgers Prep School [in Franklin Township]) and we lived over there for a year. And then he went back into the mission boardrooms in New York City and he was, oh, different [things]. He was secretary and he was the treasurer through the years. That's what he was until he died in New York City with the mission.

P. Bruno: So he used to commute to New York? He was New York commuter.

Mrs. Potter: Always, yes, yes. Yeah, he was a commuter, always in the mission work.

P. Bruno: A lot of people were commuters to New York.

E. Potter: Oh yes, yes. He always did that, yeah.

P. Bruno: And then you had three children and they were raised in this house?

E. Potter: All of them, every one of them, um-hm. All of them grew up here. [chuckles]

P. Bruno: Well, tell me about your children then. You told me about them last time.

E. Potter: What about them? Baba—he's the one, he was born in India.

P. Bruno: Is he the one in soap operas?

E. Potter: No, Allen is the one in soap operas⁶, yeah. Baba [Rev. Francis Edward Potter] is a minister in Lexington, Massachusetts at the moment. He had different churches through the years. And Allen [Marmaduke Potter] is the soap opera producer. And [Elsie] June [(Potter) Durkee] lives here in Metuchen.

P. Bruno: Yeah, I think Mrs. [Ruth] Terwilliger knows your daughter.

E. Potter: Maybe she knows her, yeah. Well, she lives here in Metuchen. Her husband's [Gene Durkee] dead, and she has five children and she's a singer. She sings and she teaches

⁶ Allen Marmaduke Potter was an American television soap opera producer who worked on *The Doctors*, *Guiding Light*, *Another World*, *As the World Turns*, and *Our Private World* from the 1960s to 1980s.

singing and she teaches the—oh, I don't know what you call it—the Presbyterian choir?

P. Bruno: Choir? In town?

E. Potter: In Metuchen. And then she sings professionally in New York too [at] Lincoln Center [for the Performing Arts] and Carnegie Hall.

P. Bruno: Oh, you must be so proud of her!

E. Potter: Oh, she has a beautiful voice if I do say it myself. She sings there quite a lot.

P. Bruno: Well, did she start taking voice lessons when she was young?

E. Potter: Well, she started—I'll tell you, she used to take piano lessons as a little girl. And oh, we had such trouble getting her—like all mothers do—getting her to practice. And the teacher came to the house to teach her and she would never touch that piano until she saw the teacher walking up the street. Then she'd rush to the piano and try to make something. Well, this went on so long that in the meantime we were a great family to stand around the piano and sing.

P. Bruno: Yeah, you play the piano, don't you?

E. Potter: I used to, but I don't anymore. And my husband played the violin. He was quite musical, and we'd sing. And my husband used to say that she had such a, as a little girl, a lovely voice; he said, "I think June's going to sing real well someday. Just on key—not like me, I was always flat." But anyway, when we finally decided that she wasn't getting anywhere with her piano lessons and she said she'd like to take singing lessons. This was after a few years because she must have been about sixteen, I guess, when she started. That's about the right time to try to start a person, not before that. And we did not set out—didn't know where to send her—to whom to send her. I wanted a good teacher if she was going to have singing lessons. And our organist suggested the head of the music department at Douglass. See she didn't go to Douglass, but he taught private pupils too. So she went there for four years. Before she was able to drive herself, I used to have to drive her over once a week for her singing lesson with Mr. Lasma [phonetic]; he was the head of the music department and we felt quite at home over [there]. Then we called it NJC [New Jersey College for Women].

P. Bruno: Right.

E. Potter: Yeah. Oh, she said he really started her right. They used to give operettas and everything and her voice began to develop. So when she finished—she got out of school and she'd been four years with him—then instead of going to a regular college she went to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York for four years. And oh, she had a wonderful training there not only in voice, but languages and everything that goes with it. So when she finished at the Eastman School, graduated from there, then she came home and commuted to New York and had a private teacher, a man teacher in New York City, until she was married. And so she had a lot of training, and in the meantime her voice was getting lovelier and lovelier.

P. Bruno: And she continued singing, I guess [unclear]?

- E. Potter:** All the time, oh yes. She sang, well, yes—right after she was married too, she did other things. She went out to Garden City, Long Island [New York] two days a week and taught music to the girls' school, very fine girls' school in Garden City, Long Island. She'd go in the morning and stay overnight. She had two days a week she was there. And she sang in—oh, I can't tell you how many different churches in New York City and East Orange. She was singing at East Orange at the time of her wedding. Oh, she sang everyplace and still does really, yes. She sang at a wedding here last Saturday morning for somebody in the [First] Presbyterian Church. I don't know; she told me the name, but I don't know who. Do you know who it was?
- P. Bruno: No.
- E. Potter:** So, she sings all the time and teaches.
- P. Bruno: Does she teach in Metuchen or around here?
- E. Potter:** Yes, right in her home. The pupils come to her home.
- P. Bruno: Oh, she gives private lessons?
- E. Potter:** Oh, private lessons, yes, yes. Oh, she has about twelve pupils, but she said she could have so many pupils. Mr. oh, what is his name at the head of the department now at Douglass? You'd probably know it if I spoke about—
- P. Bruno: Right. I wouldn't know it offhand.
- E. Potter:** Oh, you wouldn't know? Well, he sends up pupils from Douglass too. And this summer she had a—oh, then she sang with a group just for fun, not for professionally, not for money or anything—that met. They met at the Middlesex [County] College [in Edison]. Do you know where it is?
- P. Bruno: Yeah.
- E. Potter:** Down at the—we call it Bonhamtown—but anyway, [they met] every Tuesday night. And there were people—some man from New York City came—oh, he was the head of the music department at Middlesex College, and he got up this group to sing. And anybody—you had to sing for him first, he just didn't take anybody. But I mean you had to audition. And they came from all around. I think June was the only one from Metuchen. But they come from as far away as Caldwell, New Jersey and New Brunswick and Princeton and oh, everyplace and [unclear] sing. So this group this past summer went to Romania to sing.
- P. Bruno: Wow!
- E. Potter:** Yeah. What a thing! The Romanian government paid for it, and I believe it was the Romanian government plus the *Reader's Digest* [magazine] in our country. And there were forty some of them went, and they flew to Romania and they were gone three weeks. And they sang all over in Romania and Bulgaria. She had the most wonderful [time]. Well, it was pretty rough, I'll tell you, when she got home and told stories. But it was—I mean they were wonderful too. But it was some experience for her. So she was gone three weeks there. She went to the end of May and got back

about the middle of June. I think she paid some money toward it too. It was quite an expensive trip, but it was the Romanian government and *Reader's Digest* and then each one of them put in a little money of their own.

P. Bruno: Oh, that must [unclear] good.

E. Potter: Yeah, it was wonderful.

P. Bruno: Well let's see, let's backtrack a little to when you came back from India and you were living in this house. How has Metuchen changed?

E. Potter Oh, that's something I can't tell you; I mean at that time. You know those things are so gradual you don't really notice. It's just, I suppose, the story of any small town that gradually changes. It's really very hard for me to tell you, pinpoint.

P. Bruno: When you came back, were a lot of people that you had remembered, had they gone and left Metuchen or were your same friends here?

E. Potter: Most all of them; most all of them were here. I suppose there must have been some who had gone, but I don't quite remember that part. But I think most all of them were here.

P. Bruno: And who are some of your friends now?

E. Potter: Oh, I don't know. I've got so many friends. [laughs]

P. Bruno: But ones that have grown up with you in Metuchen.

E. Potter: Well, the same people; Mrs. Dana and Mrs.—I can't tell you that. I can't tell you who my friends are because there are so many. I could name half the town! [laughs] I know in the church—I've always attended the Dutch Reformed Church—even that though has changed through the years, you know people move away. But they're all my friends. It's hard for me to name anyone special.

P. Bruno: But the women that you play bridge with, you still see them?

E. Potter: Oh, sure, yeah.

P. Bruno: And that's a small little group, isn't it?

E. Potter: That's a small group. That's not the one I was telling you where the couples played in the evening. That was the Evening Bridge [Club] with the men and all that. Oh no, I belong to a bridge club and I belong to the Quiet Hour Club⁷, you know that?

P. Bruno: Yes, the women's club that presents paintings.

⁷ The Quiet Hour Club was organized in 1895 through the efforts of Hester M. Poole to bring together the women in Metuchen "for mental culture, social intercourse, and a sympathetic understanding of whatever women are doing along the best lines of progress."

E. Potter: Yes, I'm on that. I'm not very club-minded though. I mean I'm not a clubwoman, but I do like the Quiet Hour Club. I haven't gone very much this winter; ever since I broke this leg, I've been kind of—

P. Bruno: You broke your leg?

E. Potter: Oh, it's been over a year now. And I was in a plaster cast and it's never been quite the same. It healed nicely, but I tell you I limp around and it bothers me terrible. It feels as if it wouldn't bear my weight and everybody said, "Oh, you should have a cane." "Oh dear," I said, "I hope I haven't come to that!" But you know I'm telling you the truth it almost feels as if that would feel good.

P. Bruno: Just a little extra support.

E. Potter: Yeah, just for a little—just feels ridiculous every time I step on it, as if it's going to break under me. I have to wear what I call these clodhoppers. I never have worn sensible shoes in my life and now I have to! [laughs]

P. Bruno: They're very nice shoes.

E. Potter: About time I did, don't you think so? Oh dear, I have to laugh about my clodhopper shoes! [laughs]

P. Bruno: So what about Metuchen today? What do you think of the town today?

E. Potter: Oh, I think it's just wonderful; it's my home.

P. Bruno: So you're very happy here?

E. Potter: I'm really happy here. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else, no. It's just home to me and I just wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I really wouldn't. It's near enough to New York and to all the things, like my daughter going into to sing and all that. And I go with her occasionally. Once in a great while, I go with her if it's something special. But she goes back and forth, goes up to Lincoln Center all the time (that's her old stamping ground) and Carnegie Hall, those places.

So I don't know what else to say about Metuchen today. You know just as much about it as I do. I wouldn't know any—

P. Bruno: Oh, tell me about—let's go way back to when you were little. I want you to say this about when you were little and the Litterst sisters used to ride their bicycle?

E. Potter: Oh yes. [laughs]

P. Bruno: Tell us that story.

E. Potter: Well, they were two little tiny girls [Louise and Elizabeth Litterst] that lived way up [at 36 Middlesex Avenue]—their house is down now too. Their old house that they lived in is torn down and that was a funny story. One day, the two Littersts and myself and a fourth person, we were going out for lunch. We were just going to take a ride and go for lunch. And we drove out—we didn't know where we were going—we drove out in that direction on our way and we passed there. And the Littersts always

looking at their old home and they said—oh, they heard it was—they knew it was sold, but they heard it was going to be torn down.

P. Bruno: Their old home in Metuchen?

E. Potter: Yes.

P. Bruno: And when was that?

E. Potter: **And torn down and small houses put up there. And we went out to lunch, we came back the same way and the house was gone.**

P. Bruno: What happened?

E. Potter: **Well, they tore it down! That's how they tear down houses nowadays. And I know that because up here on the hill above me there used to be a huge house. Daniels Hill—when I was little girl, we used to toboggan down it. And we'd look out [at] this great big house and it too we heard it was going to be torn down. And then one morning, I saw a lot of big things that looked like bulldozers or something like that and I thought, *Uh oh, they're getting ready to tear the house down.* And I looked, I stood at the sink doing the breakfast dishes and I'm watching these things move around and I went upstairs and did something, and came back and went back in the kitchen and there was no house there. You know what they do? They put big ropes or something around it and then the bulldozers go and they just pull. That's the way they take them down nowadays.**

P. Bruno: So how long ago did they tear down the Litterst sisters' home?

E. Potter: **Oh, it's hard to me to think how many years ago; it wasn't that many years ago. Oh, maybe [counting] fifteen, twelve years, ten, twelve or fifteen, something like that.**

P. Bruno: So it's been fairly recent?

E. Potter: **Oh yes, yes, fairly recently because after the Litterst house, after that was sold [in 1965], they came to live over at Redfield Village [Apartments] and they haven't lived there [long]. Now they just recently, the last couple of weeks, [they] have moved away but that [unclear] seemed it's fairly recently, yes.**

But they [Litterst sisters] used to come down [from] their house, and I can't tell you which houses because I don't know the names of the people that own them now. But there were only about three houses between their house and our house, which was then what we called the White Sisters bought it, the nuns. And there was a circle where you drove in the house and drove around the circle and the Littersts had a bicycle. Apparently, they only had one bicycle. I don't know, maybe it was only the oldest sister [Louise Litterst] that came down. But she would ride down to my house and let me ride the bicycle around the circle if I would let her push the baby carriage with the new baby, which was Mrs. [Mary Ruth (Burroughs)] Eby. [laughs] So I know how long ago that was, it was eighty-one years ago. That's how old Mrs. Eby is. [laughs]

P. Bruno: Wow. What kind of bicycle? Was it the kind with the one big tire and one little tire?

- E. Potter:** No, no, no. It just looked like—it wasn't quite that long ago. I know that what you mean [with] the big wheel in front. Oh no, it looked just like a [unclear] bicycle. I think I had one then after that. But Lou Litterst had a bicycle before I did and I just loved to ride it, I know that. So she and I loved to have her push the baby, I know that. [laughs]
- P. Bruno: So it worked out fine for you.
- E. Potter:** It worked out beautifully.
- P. Bruno: And what about other playmates? Did you have other playmates when you were little?
- E. Potter:** Not so many in those days because, as I say, there were so few houses and present life today when you go over in cars and every kiddie has a bicycle on the road. Now everybody goes everywhere so easily, but then we didn't. No, I don't remember any other playmates, not that long ago.
- P. Bruno: What did you do to keep occupied when you were little? Did you play any sort of games?
- E. Potter:** I suppose, I don't remember. I presume we did just what would be natural, I suppose, maybe. I don't remember.
- P. Bruno: You had one other sister?
- E. Potter:** No, I had a brother [Edward Allen Burroughs Jr.], an older brother. He's not living now; he's dead. And a sister [Mary Ruth (Burroughs) Eby], a younger sister.
- P. Bruno: So you were the middle child?
- E. Potter:** I was the middle one, yeah. I imagine we played among ourselves, I don't really remember. But when we moved from there into the next house, into the Edgar house, then by that time I was getting to be a teenager and then I had millions of friends. Then I went down to the school [Franklin School] down here with everybody.
- P. Bruno: Did the school have social functions for the students?
- E. Potter:** No, I don't think we did, not the way they do sometimes now. They didn't then, no. But we went to one another's houses after school. You wouldn't go home; you'd go to some of your friends' houses. Or else they'd come to your houses. And I remember in the Edgar house giving my brother and me a surprise party.
- P. Bruno: Oh, tell me about that.
- E. Potter:** Oh, they wanted—all the gang, all our friends, there were many—wanted a party and they wanted a good big house. We had the big house, so they came unbeknownst to us and asked if they could give us a surprise party [on] Halloween night. And my father and mother said yes. So they arrived, and I don't know how they kept us in the kitchen, the back, while the gang of kids came in the front and into the big parlor. They're huge rooms. And then my mother called us into the front and we put on the lights, the electric lights, and there the rooms were full of all our friends! Oh, I tell you one thing, and they carried on, so my mother said she never, she never

recovered from it! [laughs] They broke the sofa like that chair's broken, only it was a whole sofa.

P. Bruno: Oh my.

E. Potter: They broke a china lamp that had a china globe. They were just awful. I don't think they were really awful, but they were just having a good time. And I've never forgotten that party. But I'll tell you who used to come and see me; he was one of my boyfriends, [Alfred] Joyce Kilmer⁸.

P. Bruno: Oh, wow!

E. Potter: Joyce Kilmer. And I laugh—the family laughs so when I tell them about Joyce Kilmer. Now this I hate to say because if anybody heard this tape—Joyce Kilmer used to come and he was such a dandy, and he carried a cane on his arm.

P. Bruno: How old were you around this time when Joyce Kilmer came?

E. Potter: How old? Oh, I don't know because it was sometime between—I must have been like eighteen [years old]. Eighteen while I lived in the—and he'd come over, and that house was built like this is, only with a hall through the center and the big parlors (two huge parlors) on one side, and on the other side where I have a dining room now, there was a library. And my grandmother lived with us and on Sunday afternoons her children would come and see her. They were all middle-aged people; they'd come to see their mother. And they'd congregate over in the library. And Joyce Kilmer would come to see me, not always on Sundays, but when he came it would be a Sunday. And he would come in and they would be talking so loud and laughing and carrying on, and I was so afraid that they were going to see Joyce Kilmer and make fun of him because he was such a, to me, he was such a sissy! Oh, he was a terrible sissy. I don't want to, I hate to have [unclear]. And my sister, Mrs. Eby and her other friend, who were little girls then, they would grab his cane and his hat and go hide it so that when he wanted to go home, he couldn't go home. [laughs] Oh, I remember [it] was so funny.

P. Bruno: How did you meet him?

E. Potter: Well, he was a friend of my husband's in college, you see.

P. Bruno: And where did your husband go to college?

E. Potter: Rutgers [University]. Oh, he went to—

P. Bruno: Your husband met Joyce Kilmer at Rutgers?

E. Potter: They were fraternity—in the same; they were fraternity brothers. He [her husband] went to prep school, the Rutgers Prep School, but he didn't graduate because he left

⁸ Alfred Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) was an accomplished writer and poet noted for his famous poem titled "Trees," which was dedicated to his mother-in-law Mrs. Ada Murray Alden, in 1914. He enlisted in the Army during World War I and was killed in action in July 1918 by a sniper near Ourcq River in France. He was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French for his heroism in combat. The former U.S. Army base, Camp Kilmer, in Edison and Piscataway was named after him and used as deployment center for troops during World War II.

and went into Rutgers before he graduated. And when he went to Rutgers. He didn't graduate because he left. He was a Rhodes scholar and he went to Oxford [University in Oxford, England].

P. Bruno: Oh my.

E. Potter: And when he [unclear] at Oxford, he graduated from [there]. Then he came home from Oxford and went to the seminary [New Brunswick Theological Seminary]. He was going to be a minister first. I don't know whether he was a minister or a missionary, but anyway he went into the seminary to study there. And he didn't graduate from there because before he got to the graduating place, they asked him to go to India to take this college [Voorhees College]. So he went in. At that time, he was in his late twenties. So he said the only college he ever graduated from was Oxford. But while at Rutgers, he was [in] a fraternity, Delta U [Delta Upsilon] fraternity with Joyce Kilmer. And I don't know how Joyce Kilmer met me; I know over there [in New Brunswick], but I don't know how he ever happened to come [to Metuchen]. But he came and I can remember going over to New Brunswick to his home. And you had to go on the trolley in those days.

P. Bruno: Was he writing poetry then?

E. Potter: Oh, I presume he was, but I wouldn't pay much attention to him. I was never—

P. Bruno: He just paid you social calls?

E. Potter: Just social calls, yes. I was getting bored with [unclear] being girlfriend.

P. Bruno: Oh, that's really interesting. Did you keep up your friendship during the years with him?

E. Potter: Well, no, no, because I'll tell you what happened. I told you I was married just during the war. And Joyce Kilmer, he married. And he married a girl, a Metuchen girl⁹.

P. Bruno: Could you hold on a second? I want to turn this tape over. [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Bruno: Okay. Now did his wife—?

E. Potter: Well, he married eventually. See a lot of the Metuchen girls went over to the parties at Rutgers. And eventually he married a Metuchen girl. And she had a sister, and her sister was married at the time of the [war]. After Joyce and Aline were married, her younger sister was married. And the wedding was in New York City. And Joyce was a part of the wedding party. See, he was a brother-in-law; I don't know whether he was best man or what. But anyway, my husband and I went to the wedding and it was—no, I know he [Joyce Kilmer] took the bride up the aisle. That's what he did

⁹ Alfred Joyce Kilmer married fellow poet Aline Murray at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in 1908. Aline Murray was the Henry Mills Alden's stepdaughter.

and he was already in uniform, he was going [to war]. And he left the wedding party and went and got on the ship to go to Europe, into the war.

P. Bruno: In the First World War?

E. Potter: Yeah, the First World War. And he was killed.

P. Bruno: Right from the sister's wedding?

E. Potter: Right from the sister's wedding. And he was killed then, he never came back. But you see, we knew all of them. He was just—yeah, I remember that. They were married, he and Aline. Aline was his wife.

P. Bruno: Did you know her?

E. Potter: Oh yes, we were all good friends and they lived in New York. And then when her sister was married, that's how the sister came to be married in New York City from her sister's house—not house, apartment, but in one of the—actually, they were married in the National Arts Club [in New York]. But that was the story, he [Joyce Kilmer] took her up the aisle and then he left and got on the ship and went up to the war and didn't come back. So I hate to have anything like that where I'm making fun of him, but actually—oh, I can't say it now, you see, because— [laughs]

P. Bruno: Yeah, don't worry about the tape.

E. Potter: Actually, everybody made fun of him. He was—

P. Bruno: Did he get upset when he couldn't find his hat and cane?

E. Potter: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember that far. I presume he did. [laughs] I expect I made the kids get it pretty fast. And I always wanted to get him out because my relatives were all in the room laughing about him. [laughs] I don't know if he had a high hat, but I know he had a cane over his arm, hanging on his arm on the end of that.

P. Bruno: But the cane was more of an ornament, it's not that he really needed it.

E. Potter: Oh yes. Not the way I'd be using a cane. [laughs] No, just the men carried canes when they wanted to be real dresser.

P. Bruno: Dapper.

E. Potter: Yeah. [laughs]

P. Bruno: Well, do you have anything else?

E. Potter: I don't know. I just happened to think about Joyce Kilmer, I don't know what made me think about him. Oh, I forgot him. I don't think of anything special. How many people have you got doing this?

P. Bruno: Doing the recordings? Just me and Sandy [David Heinlein].

E. Potter: **No, but how many people are doing it? I mean they went to my sister. And did you go to the Littersts?**

P. Bruno: Well, I didn't do it but—

E. Potter: **But somebody did, that's what I meant. How many different recordings?**

P. Bruno: Okay. I'll shut this off now and talk to in a minute, okay. Well, thank you very much Mrs. Potter. This is a really good tape. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]