

Richard Plechner

Date: April 21, 2022

Interviewer: Jennifer Warren

Transcriber: Jennifer Warren, September 2022

Abstract: Richard F. Plechner (1932-), the only child of Walter William Plechner and Sophie Louise (Coppersmith) Plechner, was born in Murray Hill, New York and moved to Metuchen as a young boy. His parents both received PhDs from Columbia University, where they met, and his father was a chemical engineer for the Titanium Division of the National Lead Company. His father also served in the U.S. Army Reserve as a lieutenant colonel and was killed in World War II. Following his father's death, his mother returned to work as a research chemist for Carter-Wallace, where she worked for thirty-three years.

Mr. Plechner attended Franklin School in Metuchen before transferring to Rutgers Elementary School in Somerset and Peddie School in Hightstown. He received a degree in political science from Rutgers University in 1954 and graduated from Rutgers Law School in 1959. Following law school, he set up his own private law practice in Metuchen at 351 Main Street where he worked for twenty-eight years until he was appointed Superior Court Judge for the State of New Jersey in 1988. He retired in 2017. Mr. Plechner has lived in several places in Metuchen throughout his life including 57 Library Place, 27 Hillside Avenue, 79 Lake Avenue, 48 Spring Street, and 62 Oak Avenue. He also served in the Army as a reserve for over thirty years and was a longtime member of local and state Republican organizations. Mr. Plechner served as the Republican chairman for Middlesex County during the 1980s and ran as a Republican candidate for New Jersey State Senate in 2003.

In this interview, Mr. Plechner discusses his family and his early childhood memories of Metuchen including bike riding, ice skating on Connor's Pond, the Forum Theatre, the Radio Section, Sarah Coerr's electric car, and various stores along Main Street. He also recounts his education, his experiences during World War II, his work as a lawyer in Metuchen, and political anecdotes about his friend Stanley Lease Jr. and meeting President Ronald Reagan. He concludes the interview discussing animals and the clean-up of Woodwild Park.

Interview note: Mr. Plechner is joined by his wife Mary Lou (Strahlendorff) Plechner for the interview. Overly redundant phrases and questions have been omitted from this transcription for the sake of readability.

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J. Warren: Today is Thursday, April 21, 2022 and this is Jennifer Warren, representing the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, interviewing Richard Plechner [IMAGE 01] for

our ongoing Oral History Project. Richard Plechner is a longtime resident of Metuchen who has lived here since he was three years old. He has served as a local attorney and a state judge and was active in local politics during the 1960s. We are conducting this interview at his residence at 62 Oak Avenue, Metuchen alongside his wife Mary Lou (Strahlendorff) Plechner. Mr. Plechner will use this time to discuss his life and memories of Metuchen.

It should be noted that Richard Plechner has also conducted an oral history interview with Rutgers University in 2007 and 2008. Transcriptions of that interview are available online. [recording paused]

All right, I'd like to start by asking you to tell me a bit about your parents and their background.

R. Plechner: Okay. Well, my mother [Dr. Sophie Louise (Coppersmith) Plechner] was a chemist. She had her PhD from Columbia [University]. Her college degree or undergraduate degree was from what at that time was NJC¹, and subsequently changed names a couple of times. And now really is just a dormitory area in New Brunswick.

J. Warren: It's part of Rutgers [University] now?

R. Plechner: Yeah, it was always part of Rutgers (the women's college for Rutgers). So she went to college there and then she went on to Columbia for her master's and her doctorate. My father [Lieutenant Colonel Walter William Plechner] also had his PhD from Columbia. That's where they met obviously. [laughs] He was a chemical engineer. He worked in Sayreville at the Titanium Division of the National Lead Company. He was assistant director of research. And he was called on active duty in the Army in 1940. He was a reservist from college; he went to City College in New York where he was in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] and then became a reservist. And then he was killed in action in 1943, March fourth².

So we moved to Metuchen to be close to his work. I was born in Brooklyn [New York], or actually I was born in the Murray Hill section of New York or Manhattan.

J. Warren: And when were you born?

R. Plechner: I was born November twenty-fifth.

J. Warren: Nineteen-hundred-thirty-two?

R. Plechner: Thirty-two, yeah. And we lived in Brooklyn, but the hospital happened to be in Murray Hill, which is in Manhattan. I don't remember obviously. [laughter] And when I was one year old, we moved to Piney River, Virginia because my father

¹ New Jersey College for Women, which was later renamed Douglass College.

² Lieutenant Colonel Walter William Plechner (1903-1943) was killed in action on March 4, 1943 by an exploding mine while on reconnaissance duty in Sbeitla, Tunisia. He was buried at the North Africa American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia and received posthumously the Medal of the Purple Heart from the War Department. He was the first Metuchen resident to be killed in World War II and is memorialized at Metuchen Memorial Park.

took a job as director of research for Southern Mineral Products, which is a subsidiary of I forget which company, one of the large companies³. I think I already said we've been a year in Brooklyn. We were a year in Piney River, Virginia and we came up here to Plainfield and we were a year in Plainfield. And then we came to Metuchen. So I've been in Metuchen about eighty-six years.

J. Warren: Wow.

R. Plechner: Various places in Metuchen, but always in Metuchen. I went to Rutgers College and Law School.

J. Warren: Do you think there was any particular reason why they chose Metuchen to live?

R. Plechner: Yeah, because it was close to Sayreville⁴ and it was a nice little town. It's probably the most desirable town in this area, and they figured that [would] be the place to live, be a nice place to live.

J. Warren: And where did you live?

R. Plechner: I lived various places all around town, but always in Metuchen. When we first came here, I lived at 57 Walnut Place [IMAGE 02], which is now called Library Place because we kept getting—you know there's a Walnut Street in Metuchen. At that time there was both a Walnut Street and [Walnut] Place, and we kept getting the other parties mail and they kept getting our mail. [chuckling] That was really a nuisance. And they did the right thing when they renamed the street.

When we lived on Walnut Place, we rented a house. I say we, my parents actually. And we moved from there to—well, some people bought the house from Miss Lamparter, who was the owner. And they wanted to move into the house so we had to move. So we moved to Hillside Avenue (27 Hillside), which was a two-family. And we rented one of the families. As I say, my father was killed in 1943.

J. Warren: So who lived with you as a young child? It was just your parents and you?

R. Plechner: Yes.

J. Warren: And you were an only child?

R. Plechner: I was an only child, yeah.

J. Warren: And what about the neighborhood? Did you spend a lot of time outside playing?

R. Plechner: Not much.

J. Warren: You spent it mostly inside?

R. Plechner: I was more of an inside person. Well, I was starting to say that Walnut Place—we moved from Walnut Place in—

³ Southern Mineral Products Corporation was acquired by the American Cyanamid Company in 1944.

⁴ The research laboratory of the Titanium Division of the National Lead Company transferred from an old building in Brooklyn, New York to a new building in Sayreville in 1935.

J. Warren: Was this after your father died in the war?

R. Plechner: Yeah, he was killed in [19]43.

J. Warren: Right, so this was after.

R. Plechner: That was after he was killed, shortly after. [clears throat] You just couldn't buy houses at that point. And my mother [IMAGE 03] had to go to work to support us naturally. And she got a job working in Cranbury, or actually—I don't know if that's actually in Cranbury or one of the other little towns where they all come together in New Brunswick, North Brunswick, East Brunswick, and Cranbury⁵. The address was in Cranbury.

[given tea by his wife] Now, thank you. I'll take a sip of it.

M. L. Plechner: Okay, it's hot. You want to—

R. Plechner: Well, then I won't take a sip until it cools off. Yeah, it is hot. You're right. Do you want to sit down?

M. L. Plechner: I was going to make those updates to your resume that you wanted to give to Jennifer.

R. Plechner: Where am I? I guess I'm moving to—

J. Warren: Well, you were talking about your mom working somewhere near Cranbury.

R. Plechner: Yeah, she was a chemist.

J. Warren: Right, I think it was Carter-Wallace?

R. Plechner: Carter-Wallace, yeah. As I say, she and my father both went to Columbia for their doctorates, and that's where they met. And they were both in the chemical field. My father was a chemical engineer and my mother was a chemist. Then we moved to Hillside Avenue (27 Hillside) into a two-family [house], rented there [IMAGE 04]. Then after the war, we bought a house at 79 Lake Avenue.

J. Warren: You and your mother bought the house?

R. Plechner: Well, basically she bought the house. [chuckles] I was only a little kid. I lived in the house. [laughs]

J. Warren: So you were still a teenager at that time?

R. Plechner: I was not a teenager yet. I was in around third grade when we moved to Hillside Avenue. And then shortly after that, I went to Rutgers Elementary [School].

⁵ According to an essay by his mother Sophie Plechner, she states, "When I lost my husband in 1943, it again became necessary to find a full time job...Recalling my experience in toiletries development I applied for a job at Carter Products, then in New Brunswick, and was hired. Since the company was small I had the opportunity to work in all phases of product development, formulation, pilot plant and plant production as well as quality control. Such experience has been invaluable and is one of the advantages of working in a small company or division."

J. Warren: And you were mentioning before that your mom sent you to Rutgers so that you wouldn't get into trouble.

R. Plechner: Well, I think it was the general theory. [laughs] Then I moved from Hillside Avenue to Lake Avenue (79 Lake), and we bought the house there. That was after the war when you could buy houses again. That was a new house. In fact, it hadn't been finished yet when we bought it. [clears throat] And then finally, 48 Spring Street and after that, we moved here [to 62 Oak Avenue].

Mary Lou? When did I move to this house?

M. L. Plechner: I think it was 1962.

R. Plechner: Thank you. 1962.

J. Warren: So you've been here a long time.

R. Plechner: So I've lived here quite a while, yeah.

J. Warren: So I imagine you like this house quite a lot.

R. Plechner: Yeah, I like the house [IMAGE 05]. I like the location.

J. Warren: So I want to go back to—you were talking about how it was difficult to buy a house. And this was during World War II.

R. Plechner: Now, basically I was only ten years old at the time my father was killed. So I can only look at it from the viewpoint of a ten year old. I don't know all the details to the buying and the selling [unclear] that my mother did. And she's the one that went to work. [chuckles]

J. Warren: But do you remember World War II being a time of hardship or were you just a kid and oblivious to that?

R. Plechner: Well, it was tough in a way. My father was away. He went on active duty in December of 1940. He was called up for one year. Well, December 1940 was not a good year to be called up for one year! [laughs]

J. Warren: That's true.

R. Plechner: Of course, the war came on December seventh [1941]. And he was in First Infantry Division in the Division Headquarters. He was lieutenant colonel when he was killed. They went to England first [in 1942], and then they went over the beach in North Africa. They first went into Algeria and then Tunisia. He's buried in Tunisia. We went over to see his—buried in the American Military Cemetery⁶ there because, I get this from my mother, he said if he gets killed, if he doesn't come back, he should be buried where he fell basically.

⁶ The World War II cemetery is officially known as the North Africa American Cemetery and Memorial, which is located in Carthage, Tunisia.

- J. Warren: So in World War II, I mean there was a lot of rationing, a lot of things going on.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, rationing. It wasn't any real hardship though.
- J. Warren: You didn't feel like it was a hardship at that time? You were so young?
- R. Plechner:** I just did what I was told or what I could get away with. [laughs] My mother was the boss. She decided what we ate and what we did.
- J. Warren: So she was a tough lady?
- R. Plechner:** Not too tough. She wanted me to behave. And I've got to say, I think that's right.
- J. Warren: She was a good mother?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, I'd say she was a very good mother. And she worked almost the rest of her life. They had mandatory retirement at Carter-Wallace at age seventy, I think. And she was given another offer from another job from another company, a bigger company. And she told the people at Carter-Wallace, she was going to go to work there at the other company unless she could keep her job. So they created a new job that could go beyond age seventy.
- J. Warren: Oh wow!
- R. Plechner:** Well, she liked to work.
- J. Warren: So she enjoyed her job?
- R. Plechner:** And she liked to travel. And she traveled for the company. Now this is not when she first went there, she worked her way up. But she traveled the company to Europe particularly. I think she also went to Japan and maybe Australia, I'm not sure, but mainly to Europe a number of occasions. She was national chairman of the Society of Cosmetic Chemists. I have some information here. [shows folder of information on mother]
- That's her on that corner.**
- J. Warren: Okay. [reading from excerpt] "Sophie Coppersmith Plechner. A research chemist in the pharmaceutical and cosmetic field with several patents to her credit. Dr. Plechner has been widely honored. Dr. Plechner is the manager of technical services for Carter Products International. She was the first woman to hold the national presidency of the Society of Cosmetic Chemists and has also received the Corwin Award for outstanding alumnae service."
- That's great.
- R. Plechner:** So she kept busy obviously.
- J. Warren: And did she live with you for most of her life?

- R. Plechner:** Yes, basically all of her life. This is her resume⁷.
- J. Warren: Oh my goodness! This is probably a bit too long to read out, but very impressive. And she was a member of the Reformed Church in Metuchen?
- R. Plechner:** Yes. I still am⁸.
- J. Warren: Oh, you are as well? And she was also a member of the Republican Club as well.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, she was active in the Republicans. She was just in general very active. She wasn't one who liked to sit still for long.
- J. Warren: Right, so she was very independent.
- R. Plechner:** Yes, I'd say that.
- J. Warren: So I wanted to talk a little bit about Metuchen when you were growing up, things that you remember from that time.
- R. Plechner:** Well, it was smaller of course than it is today.
- J. Warren: Not as much traffic?
- R. Plechner:** Not nearly as much traffic. Route 27 has become a real hazardous, overused road. [laughter]
- J. Warren: Now you had mentioned in a previous interview [with Rutgers University] that you liked to bike ride around.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, I used to ride a bike. I started out, when I got old enough, so I could reach the pedals and what have you. I started and I'd ride around on my bike. My uncle, my Uncle Frederick, my mother's brother, gave me his old bike from when he was a kid (he was an adult, of course, at the time). And his bike was kind of old and battered, so we traded it in on a less old and battered bike. [laughter]
- J. Warren: Now was that locally? Like was there a bike shop around here?
- R. Plechner:** No, not--was there a bike shop?
- J. Warren: Yeah, like how did you get your bike? Do you remember?
- R. Plechner:** I think there was a bike shop where there is now an antique store near the corner of Middlesex [Avenue] and Main [Street]. Do you know where I mean?
- J. Warren: Near Danford's?

⁷ Mrs. Plechner's resume is on file at the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's archives.

⁸ In a previous phone call on February 2, 2022, Mr. Plechner recalled the 1948 fire at the Reformed Church by saying, "They [the firefighters] smashed the wonderful, beautiful window that was there. And that was upsetting. Yeah, I remember the fire and I of course went to Sunday school at that time."

- R. Plechner:** Right next to Danford's. In there somewhere I think is where it came from. I think there was an old firehouse there.
- J. Warren: The Washington Hose [Company at 505 Middlesex Avenue]?
- R. Plechner:** Yes. And I think at that time, at some time, I think—I don't know—a lot of years there. [laughs] I think that's where the bike came from, but I couldn't swear to it. I wasn't concentrating on remembering at that point. [laughter]
- J. Warren: Yeah, I just threw it out there as just a curiosity. So you had mentioned you had biked to Plainfield, Highland Park, Roosevelt Park?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, I went bike riding sometimes to Roosevelt Park, sometimes to Highland Park, to South Plainfield.
- J. Warren: Now did you go by yourself?
- R. Plechner:** Well, either by myself or with one of the other kids.
- J. Warren: And was it to just explore the area? Or did you go to specific places?
- R. Plechner:** No, just to ride our bikes. Kids like to ride bikes or they did back then. I think they're probably more sophisticated today, but we had fun riding our bikes. [laughter]
- J. Warren: And so no curfew or anything? You could just ride wherever you wanted?
- R. Plechner:** Well, I wouldn't be out late. Not when I was a little kid anyway. I'd ride with my friend, Bobby Meshanic [Robert Willmont Meshanic], who lived down the street from me [formerly at 25 Walnut Place], used to go with me. He was like two years older than me.
- J. Warren: And so did you have a lot of friends when you were a kid?
- R. Plechner:** Oh, I had some. Metuchen wasn't full of kids; you know it wasn't that big. I think there were around 5,000 people in Metuchen at that time. There are like three times that now. So it makes a little difference.
- J. Warren: But was it a close neighborhood? Did you know all your neighbors and were they frequently in contact?
- R. Plechner:** I knew most of them or my mother did, the ones I didn't know. I don't remember frankly who they all were. Aylin Pierson lived on that street [formerly at 32 Elm Avenue]. He's an architect. [coughs] The Meshanics lived on that street, my friend Bobby. Mrs. Willmont lived on that street [formerly at 29 Walnut Place]. That was Mrs. Meshanic's mother. The [St. Francis of Assisi] Catholic Church had a house on that street [at 10 Library Place] that I believe the priest lived in at that time. That was before they had a bishop in Metuchen, which I think they have now. But Metuchen was much smaller then as I say.
- J. Warren: And the library [Metuchen Public Library at 480 Middlesex Avenue] was on that street as well.

R. Plechner: Yeah, that was smaller too.

J. Warren: Yeah. [laughs] Did you spend a lot of time in the library?

R. Plechner: My mother for a while was the Children's Room librarian [from 1941 to 1943]. That was when my father was still alive and he was overseas. And she did it as something to do. They didn't have the money to pay a librarian. They only could give her a couple hundred dollars a year. So she took the couple hundred and then she did the job for the year. That was the arrangement.

J. Warren: And do you remember any specific stores or restaurants that you used to go to?

R. Plechner: Well, we used to go to Metuchen Inn [at 424 Middlesex Avenue]. And then during the war, it was closed because the people who owned it were German⁹. And they couldn't operate a business in town, which I thought was too bad. Our family background is German.

J. Warren: So was there a lot of that sentiment?

R. Plechner: I think there was. We used to go to Shrabus Halp [phonetic] up in—oh, heck where's that? Watchung?

J. Warren: Where was this?

R. Plechner: In Watchung, I think. It's over by Route 22, but up on the hill where the highway is, yeah, below that. And that was closed because of the war, because the people that owned it and ran it were German.

J. Warren: But you mentioned you were German. Did you feel any hostility from anyone during the war years?

R. Plechner: I didn't, but I was a kid; growing up, no, because we lived here for several generations. [laughs] I've never been to Germany, never knew anything about it basically, and the same with my parents. A lot of German immigration was around the 1850s and that's basically when our family came over. But I was not alive in 1850 despite rumors to the contrary. [laughs]

J. Warren: And then also during the war, there were scrap drives and war bonds. Were you ever involved in any of that?

R. Plechner: Yeah, we used to buy—well, at school, they had stamp books and you buy war stamps and put in the stamp book. At that time, \$25.00 bonds were \$18.75. When you took out the stamp book, that's what was traded / turned in for. I had bonds. I had some of the \$18.75 bonds, couldn't afford much more than that. [laughs]

J. Warren: As a kid, yeah. And then also scrap drives or rubber drives?

R. Plechner: I'm sorry? I still didn't—

⁹ The Metuchen Inn was incorporated in 1923 under proprietor Harry Holstein.

- J. Warren: Scraps, like metal. Did you do any of that?
- R. Plechner:** Oh, scrap metal, yes. I'm glad you brought that up, that's interesting. There was an old Model A, wreck of an old Model A¹⁰ in the woods back here, and we used to play in it as a kid cause Walnut Place was right down the street here behind the library. And then during the war, it was hauled away for scrap metal. And we (by we, I mean myself and the other kids) were very disappointed and upset by that.
- [sips tea; offhand comment to wife who hands him his eyeglasses] Oh, I can actually read. Thanks, hun. [chuckling] So that was the end of our—
- J. Warren: So that was in the park [Woodwild Park]?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah. Somebody junked it in the park. I don't know who, that was before my time. It had been there apparently quite a while. As I say, we used to walk up from Walnut Place to the park and play in the car. That was really a great thing because it was a real car. [laughter] As I say, I remember, as I recall, it was a Model A, Ford.
- J. Warren: Now were there any other places in Metuchen, like along Main Street, that you remember?
- R. Plechner:** There were, what you call at that time, the Red Hills. And that was down by the Radio Section. Now are you familiar with the Radio Section¹¹?
- J. Warren: Yeah, I know where it is.
- R. Plechner:** Okay, it was in there somewhere. When I say hills, that's what it was called, but they were bumps.
- J. Warren: Mounds?
- R. Plechner:** You know it was a small area.
- J. Warren: But was it open fields at the time?
- R. Plechner:** Yes.
- J. Warren: Okay. And so you would just go there to play?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, to ride our bicycles because you go up and down the little hills.
- J. Warren: Did you go to any ponds? There's a lot of ponds around Metuchen.

¹⁰ The Model A car was made by the Ford Motor Company on two separate occasions: 1903-1904 and 1927-1931.

¹¹ The name Radio Section is derived from the name of the owner who subdivided the property back in February 1927. The property was farmland when a company named Radio Associates bought it, subdivided it into forty-by-hundred-foot lots, laid out the streets, and in most cases built small Cape Cods, bungalows, and Colonial houses. The land extended from Central Avenue to Main Street and Plainfield Avenue to West Chestnut Avenue. Streets in the Radio Section are named after universities including University Avenue, Harvard Avenue, Columbia Avenue, Midland Avenue, Rutgers Street, Princeton Street, and Lafayette Street.

- R. Plechner:** In the winter, we used to go skating on Connor's Pond, which is right over here. Because there were no houses, there were just woods once you got beyond these houses right along [East] Chestnut [Avenue]. I broke my arm on the skating there, and that was a big deal. I had it in a cast. Back then they used to wrap them in plaster casts and everybody signed it and I had all these autographs on it. I thought that was hot stuff. [laughter] That was really worth breaking my arm over.
- J. Warren: So what about later in life, were there places on Main Street that you frequented¹²?
- R. Plechner:** Not really because later I was away at school or in the Army. I don't know when.
- J. Warren: But when you came back here to live, were there specific places that you liked to be at?
- R. Plechner:** Not really. As I say, we used to eat from time to time at the Metuchen Inn. But that stopped with the war. I can't think of any other place. There was a place called Ramble Inn [at 36 Middlesex Avenue]. We used to eat there; that was out [on] 27.
- J. Warren: Yeah, they [Elizabeth and Louise Litterst] had a tearoom.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah. Well, that's what they called it anyway. I never really determined what a tearoom was; how that was any different from a regular restaurant. [laughter] You could go in and get your supper there.
- [speaks to wife] Honey, do you want to sit by us?
- M. L. Plechner: Did you remember everything you wanted to talk to Jennifer about?
- R. Plechner:** I've got notes, the notes that you brought down.
- M. L. Plechner: Okay. Did you tell her about going to the Forum [Theatre at 314 Main Street]?
- R. Plechner:** No, we haven't gotten to the movies yet. That's a place I went, the Forum Theatre.
- J. Warren: And you went there to watch movies?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah. Well, on Saturday, they would have a movie that would be good for kids like Roy Rogers [actor in Western films] or something like that before the regular movie. And they'd have a regular movie that was suitable for kids. And back then, things were different—different grades of suitability than we have today, I think.

¹² In a previous phone call on February 2, 2022, Mr. Plechner recalled some stores that he remembered along Main Street. He stated, "I remember Kramer's. I remember there was a restaurant where I had a hamburger every now and then on the corner of Hillside and well—what's the street that Hillside runs into? New Street. On the corner of New Street and Main. And a friend of mine, I guess his mother, would rent an apartment up above it and my mother could always tell me and yell at me when I had been down there because I smelled like hamburgers. [laughs]"

M. L. Plechner: You said it used to be a dime. Is that right?

R. Plechner: The first times I went to the Forum Theatre were ten cents for kids, which was half-price or something. It cost twenty cents or twenty-five cents for adults. You could buy something with your money back then. [laughs] And I and sometimes Bobby Meshanic or Jackie Hill [John Hill], who was another friend of Bobby Ellis [Robert Ellis], and I would go to the movies on Saturday, particularly because the movies were appealing to kids. Now what was I thinking? I just forgot.

M. L. Plechner: Didn't you get there—one Saturday you got there and the price had been raised? [laughter]

R. Plechner: Oh yeah. I remember one Saturday I got there and the price had been raised and it was like twelve cents.

J. Warren: And you didn't have the money?

R. Plechner: All I had was a dime or a dime and a penny. I had eleven cents.

J. Warren: Did he let you in?

R. Plechner: So I had to run all the way home so I could get back in time to see the movie. I got home and got another couple cents from my mother. [laughs] And then went back to the movie.

J. Warren: Now you mentioned on our previous phone call about Mrs. [Sarah] Coerr's electric car¹³. I thought that was very interesting.

R. Plechner: Oh yeah. She lived up here in one of the houses that fronts on 27.

Audience: Yeah, 300.

R. Plechner: What?

M. L. Plechner: 300 Middlesex Avenue.

R. Plechner: Oh, I wouldn't know the address. She was a little older than me. [laughter]

¹³ In previous phone call on February 2, 2022, Mr. Plechner stated that "...there was a lady in Metuchen, I guess this was before World War II or right after it started, that had an electric car. And you know they talk so much about electric cars nowadays, but this was back in the early forties...but Mrs. Coerr was the name of the lady who drove it around. She didn't drive much. She wasn't that modern, but she would be parked in front of the library a lot of the time because she liked to go to the library and she was on the library board. And as kids, we'd see it parked there. We'd run, we'd stand up on the whatever you call the thing that comes out of the car where you stand on, and look in. And that was very exciting for us. You know I was probably about eight or nine years old at the time. It just fits in with today when you say to tell you how things have changed. Things change and at the same time, things stay the same. So that's one thing that I do remember. And the car inside was like a little parlor. It had vases in it. They didn't have little automobile seats, they had little chairs, a couple of them, like living room chairs. It's very interesting, you know as a kid, it was very exciting to see that. The lady lived on Middlesex Avenue and I guess she didn't travel much out of town from what my parents told me...And both ends [of the car] looked about the same and they threw the cabin in between."

M. L. Plechner: No, she wasn't 300 years old. [laughter]

R. Plechner: Yeah, she had an electric car [IMAGE 06]. And it would be parked in front of the library. She was on the library board apparently, according to my mother, and would be in the library from time to time I guess helping out or whatever. And the car would be parked out on the street in front of the library. The kids all thought, myself included, that that was a great thing, that car. And we would look in it, and the front and back were the same. They were like that, down. And there was an outside running board. We'd get up on the running board and you could see into the car. It was like a little parlor in the car. It had—well, none of the seats here— it had little, like easy chairs or—what would you call that kind of chair? I'm trying to think where we have something here? Little chairs. There's some in the bedroom, I think.

M. L. Plechner: [clears throat] I don't know that there's a particular name for them, just small upholstered chairs.

R. Plechner: Yeah, small upholstered chairs. And it had like little racks by the windows with a flower in them. And that was quite an exciting event to see that little car. And she always drove it. Now apparently, she had someone who would drive her but she insisted on using her car apparently when she went, I heard from my mother. What else was in Metuchen? [drinks tea]

Well, from school, when I was still in school in Metuchen¹⁴, we used to go across the street from the school, diagonally across from the Franklin School to a little store there which sold stuff for kids [IMAGE 07]. And of course, the location is why. And I'd go in there and you could buy penny candy in there, which is something different from today. [chuckles]

M. L. Plechner: Across the street on Route 27 or on Central Avenue?

R. Plechner: I'd say it's Route 27 [Middlesex Avenue]. Well, it was the corner house; corner building I should say, not a house, corner building. And it faced both on 27 and on whatever that street is.

M. L. Plechner: Central or Lake?

R. Plechner: I don't know. It might be Central¹⁵, I'm not sure. I'm just not sure. And we'd go in there and buy penny candy. And if we got really wealthy and had a nickel, we could go to Danford's [at 476 Main Street] and we'd get a candy bar for a nickel.

M. L. Plechner: And where was Danford's?

R. Plechner: Danford's was on the corner of 27 and Main Street.

J. Warren: And that was the ritzy candy place? [laughs]

¹⁴ Mr. Plechner attended Franklin School in Metuchen until the third grade.

¹⁵ He is probably referring to Center Street.

- R. Plechner:** Yeah, that was the more expensive, you know you can buy nickel bars. The economy has changed drastically since then. [laughs]
- J. Warren: Oh, definitely.
- M. L. Plechner: That was still here during the 1980s at least, Danford's. [clears throat] So I remember when I first lived here.
- R. Plechner:** No, I mean the cost of stuff. Now there was also Dessel's, which was a grocery store.
- M. L. Plechner: Where was that?
- R. Plechner:** It was, when it was still a store, you know when you go into the property downtown.
- M. L. Plechner: On Main Street?
- R. Plechner:** Well, you go on Main, turn right. I can't remember the name of the street?
- M. L. Plechner: Well, New Street wasn't there, I guess.
- R. Plechner:** Yes, it was. That's what I'm trying to think of. New Street, that's it. [laughs]
- M. L. Plechner: Morris Stores [at 413 Main Street] used to be on the corner. That was still here when I lived here.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, Morris Stores was there for quite a while. That was there I think at least through World War II.
- M. L. Plechner: It was here through at least to the 1980s. It was here when I was here, yeah.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, I think it was there in earlier times. And Wernik's Drug Store downtown was there [at 412 Main Street], was that either started on Main Street.
- M. L. Plechner: I think that's a jewelry store [present-day A&J Jewelers] or something now, something else now.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, I don't know. I just trying to think of what stores were on Main Street at the time.
- M. L. Plechner: So where was Dessel's? On Main Street?
- R. Plechner:** Dessel's. Metuchen Food Market¹⁶ was the name of it.
- M. L. Plechner: On New Street?
- R. Plechner:** No, initially it was on Main, I believe. I'm not sure.

¹⁶ Joseph Dessel's grocery store was originally known as the Metuchen Fruit & Vegetable Market and was located in various buildings along Main Street from the late 1920s through the 1950s. The store was later renamed the Metuchen Food Market and was relocated to a new building at 319 Lake Avenue in the mid-1950s.

- J. Warren: Yeah, I think it moved. I can't remember, might have been Central Avenue¹⁷?
- R. Plechner: And then later it was down in the downtown area and then it moved out here to—well, if you go down Chestnut all the way, you get to the building where Dessel's was. They were my first clients when I was practicing law because we used to shop there and they were very nice to me.**
- J. Warren: What was the reason they were your client?
- R. Plechner: No reason except that they knew me. Well, they knew my mother actually. And we used to shop for our groceries there for many years actually.**
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, I think when you passed the bar exam they gave you a bottle of LOUIS XIII Cognac, which you had for decades. I was looking at a bottle in Costco [Wholesale] the other day, it's \$4,000 a bottle now! So we won't be enjoying any—
- R. Plechner: Well, the one that I had I think was the stuff we sold.**
- M. L. Plechner: No, the one that you had, it was stored improperly. Spirits are not supposed to be stored—we learned much too late to our regret, wine is supposed to be stored laying down, but spirits are supposed to be stored up, standing up. And it had a wonderful aroma but the flavor was off, I think.
- R. Plechner: Well, it just sat in the basement.**
- M. L. Plechner: I think everybody still drank it anyway. [laughs]
- R. Plechner: Yeah, we ultimately ended up drinking it. It was in the basement for years and I never opened it. So I thought, *Oh geez, I can't drink anything that expensive.* [laughs]**
- M. L. Plechner: Saving it for a special occasion. Well, you don't know what's going to happen to tomorrow so you drink the good stuff today.
- J. Warren: Okay. So why don't we move on and talk a little bit—
- R. Plechner: Well, there's one other business, I'm trying to think of the name. But there were a couple of butcher shops in Metuchen back then. That's something you don't have today anywhere as far as I know.**
- J. Warren: And were they located on Main Street or was that downtown?
- R. Plechner: Yeah, downtown.**
- M. L. Plechner: There's actually at least until the 1980s, I think there was a butcher shop on Pearl Street because I remember going in there and getting things.
- R. Plechner: Yes, there was. It was Pearl Street.**

¹⁷ 319 Lake Avenue.

M. L. Plechner: Yeah, and I think it was around where the Sherwin-Williams [Paint Store] used to be [at 67 Pearl Street], around that area.

R. Plechner: Yes, you're right. The thing about a butcher shop, they had good quality meat because if they were a good butcher shop, I guess they cut it themselves.

M. L. Plechner: There's still a few independent butchers. There's one in Edison. They advertise; it's in the local paper. But I guess a lot of people don't want to make the trip. Although during the lockdown, I think there was a lot of business done.

R. Plechner: Anyway, those are my thoughts. Well, of course there was the Commonwealth Bank back then [at 407 Main Street].

M. L. Plechner: Where was that?

R. Plechner: That was on Main where the--?

J. Warren: Wells Fargo [Bank], I think.

R. Plechner: Oh yeah, Wells Fargo, where Wells Fargo is. Wells Fargo bought it. Now it's the Wells Fargo Bank. But when I was in kindergarten, they had—I don't know what day it was—it was weekly or monthly, but we were supposed to bring some money into school and it would be deposited in the Commonwealth Bank I think at that time (either Commonwealth Bank or Metuchen Savings [Bank], but I think initially Commonwealth Bank). And of course, there was also Metuchen Savings. But the purpose for our bringing in money and depositing it was to teach us to save, which I think is a pretty good idea. There's probably some reason why they can't do that today. Back then, it was good. And then of course when we got the \$18.75, we could turn it in on a bond. At that time, the time I'm thinking of, it was called a war bond. And then later they just called it a savings bond.

J. Warren: Okay. Well, I want to go back to your education. You mentioned you went to elementary school here [in Metuchen] and then you moved to Rutgers.

R. Plechner: Yes. Then I went for a year and a half I guess to Rutgers Elementary, which was part of Rutgers Prep [Rutgers Preparatory School]. And I don't know who ran what or owned what, I was a kid. I just knew I had to go to school every day.

J. Warren: And you commuted by yourself on the train?

R. Plechner: Yeah. By then, I was old enough to do that. I went there for about a year, year and a half, something like that. Then I went to Peddie [School in Hightstown] and I lived at school because by then my mother was doing a lot of travelling, which continued until she was like in her seventies.

J. Warren: And then you went college at Rutgers?

R. Plechner: Yeah, I went to law school at Rutgers. Law school was in Newark, still is.

J. Warren: Now was there a particular reason why you became a lawyer?

R. Plechner: Had to do something for a living. [laughter]

M. L. Plechner: You told me it was because of Uncle Bunk.

R. Plechner: Well, that's why I decided to be a lawyer. My grandmother's brother, who lived with her because he had pernicious anemia and he never married, he was not very healthy at all. And I liked him, I used to sit and talk to him and he was a lawyer in New York. He went to NYU [New York University].

M. L. Plechner: And his name wasn't Bunk. It was something else.

R. Plechner: No, his name was Ferdinand.

M. L. Plechner: Okay, so that's how you came up with Bunk? [laughs]

R. Plechner: Well, according to my grandmother, I guess it was, my Uncle Frederick couldn't pronounce Ferdinand. And he was a little kid and he called him Bunk. And the name stuck. [laughter] So he was always Uncle Bunk in the family. And it has no particular meaning. It's just what Uncle Frederick could remember. They lived in Newark, Vailsburg. Newark was quite a different town at that time.

J. Warren: So then after law school, did you start practice right away?

R. Plechner: Yes.

J. Warren: And you did that in Metuchen?

R. Plechner: Yes.

J. Warren: So you opened your own practice? You opened your own firm?

R. Plechner: Yeah, that's one of the reasons I wanted to be a lawyer was because I thought it would be good to work for myself. So that's what I did. [chuckling]

M. L. Plechner: And you rented from Marty Jessen [Martin Jessen] for years in one of his Victorian offices across from the post office.

R. Plechner: Yeah, I rented an office from Marty Jessen and stayed there for all the years until I went on the bench.

M. L. Plechner: Do you know which building it was? Do you remember the office number?

R. Plechner: 351 Main Street [IMAGE 08].

J. Warren: And you rented an office there?

R. Plechner: Yeah.

J. Warren: Did you have any staff or were you just by yourself?

R. Plechner: Well, I always had a secretary, and sometimes two.

M. L. Plechner: Sometimes a law clerk depending on how busy you were.

R. Plechner: Just the normal situation, I guess you call it.

J. Warren: And were there a lot of lawyers in Metuchen at the time?

R. Plechner: When I started, there were like seven or eight.

J. Warren: And when you ended, were there a lot more?

R. Plechner: Yes, there are quite a few now.

M. L. Plechner: You used to say when you first started practicing or in the early days of your practice you knew all the lawyers in the county.

R. Plechner: Well, not all of them. You knew a lot more back then.

M. L. Plechner: And people went to the [Middlesex County] Bar Association meetings and it was not the overwhelming number of lawyers there are now.

R. Plechner: No. That's why I say, it was like seven or eight in Metuchen at the time. And I'm counting—like if a firm had two in the—that's two.

J. Warren: And so did you get a lot of business here locally?

R. Plechner: No, not a lot. Just normal.

J. Warren: And what type of law did you do?

R. Plechner: Just general practice.

J. Warren: Do you have any interesting stories or any interesting cases that you did during your time?

M. L. Plechner: You had a couple of murderers.

R. Plechner: Oh, I had a number of murder cases, several.

J. Warren: But they weren't Metuchen-related.

R. Plechner: No, they weren't related to Metuchen [unclear].

J. Warren: Were they like Middlesex County?

R. Plechner: Yeah.

J. Warren: Okay. And you were a defense lawyer for those cases?

R. Plechner: Yes. And back then, you had a clerk after law school. Well, no, you start clerking after you finished one year of law school, which I did. And you had to do at least nine months clerkship, which generally lasted for a year at least, which mine did. The purpose was to give you a view of the practice of law, give you some experience before you were out on your own. They did away with that. I think it

was a good idea and they should have kept it. I did my clerkship for Pincus and Shamy in New Brunswick. I learned a good deal from that. There's a difference between law as it's taught and law school and as it's practiced. I think it's valuable to have some practice and training before you're admitted.

J. Warren: And so how long did you work at your clerkship?

R. Plechner: Well, I was [unclear] clerk for a year. What I did, I clerked the summers. Well, when I graduated from college at Rutgers, I was called to active duty to begin a year in June of [19]55. I graduated in June of [19]54. I forget what I was going to say.

M. L. Plechner: You had one year of law school, didn't you?

R. Plechner: Oh yeah, okay. I had one year of law school for that year between when I graduated and when I went back to law—

M. L. Plechner: Then you went to active duty.

R. Plechner: Yeah, I went to active—okay. That year, I don't know what I did that year. I think I worked for National Lead [Company] that year. You had to finish one year before you could clerk. And I did the one year of law school before I went on active duty because you needed to finish your college degree before you could be commissioned, which I was. Am I making sense?

M. L. Plechner: Mm-hm. [chuckling]

R. Plechner: Okay. It's hard to remember sometimes.

J. Warren: So you were involved in the National Guard or the reserves?

R. Plechner: Well, I was involved in the reserves for thirty-seven years. I was originally involved in the National Guard.

M. L. Plechner: When you were seventeen.

R. Plechner: When I was seventeen, I joined the Guard. And I did that all through college. I was finally discharged as a corporal from the National Guard to accept a commission as a second lieutenant from ROTC. [drinks tea]

J. Warren: And how long were you with them?

R. Plechner: With the army?

J. Warren: Yeah.

R. Plechner: All told, I think thirty-four years. I started a private and I was retired as a colonel and I got a pension, which is nice eventually.

J. Warren: Was there any reason why you decided to go into the military?

- R. Plechner:** I guess primarily because my father was in the reserve, being on active duty when he was killed.
- J. Warren: Okay, I'm going to segue into politics. You had run for Borough Council in I think 1962.
- R. Plechner:** I guess it was [19]62. I know I ran for Borough Council. I'm not sure the year. It's probably in that resume that's on the table. Yeah, [19]62 sounds—is that when I—?
- J. Warren: I think it's [19]62, but it was somewhere around that time.
- R. Plechner:** Somewhere around that time, yeah.
- J. Warren: Is there any particular reason why you wanted to run or why you got into politics?
- R. Plechner:** Because my parents were Republicans and I was a Republican.
- J. Warren: And you were involved with the Republican Club in Metuchen?
- R. Plechner:** Yeah, my mother was—let me say what—I've got her stuff here. [grabs notes]
- M. L. Plechner: I can take Jennifer into the library later and show her some of your souvenirs from your political activities, if you'd like to see them?
- J. Warren: Oh yeah.
- R. Plechner:** [going through notes] This is a letter that my mother wrote to [unclear] House. She wrote to a Wendy Rosenberg, who was at the alumnae office at Douglass [College]. The bio, they asked her for a bio—
- M. L. Plechner: They wanted to know about how she chose her career.
- R. Plechner:** This talks about all her career. She had been out of college fifty years since the time she wrote this. [laughs] She says (this fits the whole family), "I believe that my chief claim to fame is that I've been around so long." [laughter] That would apply to me too. This gives a pretty good bio of her¹⁸. I wonder if we could make a copy.
- M. L. Plechner: Is that a duplicate?
- R. Plechner:** No. I was just saying, I wonder if we could—
- J. Warren: Well, I can take photographs of it after the interview.
- M. L. Plechner: Or I can even scan it in. Do you have an email address on your letter?
- J. Warren: Yeah.
- M. L. Plechner: Okay. I can scan it in and email it to you if you'd like.

¹⁸ Mrs. Plechner's letter is on file at the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's archives.

- R. Plechner:** Well, let me show you, see if you want. [hands bio to interviewer]
- J. Warren: [long pause] Yeah, this looks like a summary of her career.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah. It's just pretty accurate, pretty well-done letter. I'm looking here, this is just a resume. She graduated from college in 1923 and then she got her master's at Columbia in 1927, and her PhD in 1929, also from Columbia.
- M. L. Plechner: Most of the activities surrounding the politics weren't that interesting. There is one interesting, in particular, anecdote. Did you ever read the article, I think it was an interview with Stan Lease [Stanley E. Lease Jr.] about Richard and Ronald Reagan?
- J. Warren: No. [laughter]
- M. L. Plechner: There was an article on, I think it was in the *Sentinel*¹⁹ before it merged with the *Criterion*. It was a few years ago, but Stanley with great animation tells a story of how this photo came to be with Richard and Ronald Reagan. [chuckles] And you notice the inscription: "To my Co-Pilot."
- J. Warren: "Best regards, Ronald Reagan." [IMAGE 09]
- M. L. Plechner: And of course, Richard was not a pilot. Do you remember this story behind this photo? Do you want to tell it to Jennifer?
- R. Plechner:** Yes, okay. We had Ronald Reagan speak at a Republican function in North Brunswick, I guess it is. I can't remember the name of the restaurant. [clears throat] And I was the one who got him to come.
- M. L. Plechner: He was governor of California then. It was before he was president.
- R. Plechner:** Yeah. Though he probably he was running for it at the time. And he had to speak somewhere in New York State, I can't remember when. [It] had nothing to do with us except that's where he had to be that same day.
- M. L. Plechner: This is back in 1977, is the date on the program.
- R. Plechner:** Well, then that would be the year. Oh, the program would have the—
- J. Warren: Yeah, it says Middlesex County Republican Organization's Cocktail Party and Banquet, July 11, 1977.
- R. Plechner:** Okay, that's probably when I was Middlesex County Republican Chairman and he was going to fly down then to Linden Airport. Do you remember the airport at Linden?
- J. Warren: No.

¹⁹ The article titled "Local man recalls his day with Reagan" was published in the *Sentinel* on June 9, 2004 in remembrance of Ronald Reagan's death. Mr. Lease recalls escorting the presidential candidate from the Linden Airport to New Brunswick along U.S. Route 1 in his 1970 black Fleetwood Cadillac on a hot summer day in July 1977. The full article is available online and is on file at the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's archives.

R. Plechner: Small airport there. And he had a plane that he was flying in, and they flew and landed there. [clears throat] And we met him out on the runway, and it was me and some of the people from the Republican organization and Stan Lease, who drove a second car. And we got Reagan from the plane and Stanley started off with a car. And there was a pipe sticking up through the pavement and he drove over it and it whacked something on the bottom of his car and the car began an awful noise after it.

M. L. Plechner: I think it pulled the muffler off or something.

R. Plechner: That's what it was, his muffler. You can tell I'm not a mechanic. [laughter] I don't know anything about mechanical stuff. So the muffler was dragging on the ground and making an awful sound. And he pulled into a gas station on I guess it was the Turnpike [U.S. Route 1], off whatever way you came down coming from Linden to New Brunswick. And he pulled into a gas station there and tried to get it fixed up and a guy came out and the guy said, "Oh, we don't do repairs. We just sell gas." And this kid that was working there at the station went to the car window and looked in and he yelled back to the men at the station, "Ronald Reagan's here!" And they all ran out to look at him and say hello to him and whatnot. And they fixed his car as a result. [laughter]

M. L. Plechner: What was the story of the plane?

R. Plechner: Oh, and he got in the plane. I went up to, when we were getting him, wherever it was in New York State and the—my mind is not working.

M. L. Plechner: Well, they informed you when you got there that Ronald Reagan did not fly without a copilot.

R. Plechner: Oh, that's right. Now this lady was with us who was the state committeewoman from Middlesex County and when they said, for some reason, they just—now why did I?

M. L. Plechner: Somebody said, "Colonel Plechner will help."

R. Plechner: Oh, that's who. I got in the car, we all got in the plane.

M. L. Plechner: Yes, so you got in the copilot's seat. [laughs]

R. Plechner: And he had a rule that he only could fly if there were two pilots, a copilot and a pilot. So I sat in the copilot's seat and they said to him, "Oh, Colonel Plechner needs to sit up front and be the copilot." Well, I was an infantry colonel, I was not— [laughter]

J. Warren: You had no flying experience.

M. L. Plechner: Everybody was very happy that the pilot didn't pass out or something! [laughs] It would have been like one of those comedy movies, *Airplane*, or something.

R. Plechner: But that's what that was. I hadn't thought about that for a while.

M. L. Plechner: But Stanley has a very animated telling of this whole saga if you can find that article.

R. Plechner: Yeah, I can hardly remember. How many years ago was that must have been?

M. L. Plechner: And later some member of Ronald Reagan's entourage confronted you and said, "You're not a pilot, are you?"

R. Plechner: I said, "No, I'm an infantry officer." [laughs]

J. Warren: Well, you mentioned Stanley Lease²⁰ and I know you were close friends.

R. Plechner: Yeah, we were very good friends for many years.

J. Warren: So I didn't know if you had any other interesting stories or you want to talk about how you guys met and became friends?

R. Plechner: I don't know how we met. [laughter]

M. L. Plechner: Is that because his father was in the military?

R. Plechner: Well, his father came to me as a client.

M. L. Plechner: Because he was a soldier, right? His father.

R. Plechner: His father was a colonel in the Army. I think it was when he bought a house or something, he came to me. I represented him on the closing. And that's how I got to know Stanley and then we were friends. We used to hang out.

J. Warren: And do you remember anything particularly about his character?

R. Plechner: No. We were just very good friends for many years. Get to be my age, everything is many years. [laughter]

J. Warren: Did you get involved together with politics?

R. Plechner: Yes, Stanley was active politically, yes. I was active politically obviously. Take a look at this. [hands over resumes] That one is my mother; this is me. That would be good. And we can always make a copy of that if you want one.

J. Warren: Okay. So you became a judge I guess in 1988, around there?

R. Plechner: It's in there somewhere.

J. Warren: Yeah, 1988 to 2002. So did you enjoy being a judge?

R. Plechner: Yeah, I liked it.

²⁰ Stanley E. Lease Jr. (1935-2014) was a fifty-year Metuchen resident and elementary school teacher who owned Lease Realty Property in Metuchen. He served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War and was a member of the Metuchen American Legion, the Metuchen Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Metuchen Elks Lodge 1914. Mr. Lease also served on the Metuchen Planning Board and the Metuchen Borough Council, and he was president of the Kiddie Keep Well Camp for several years.

- J. Warren: Do you have any particular memories about it?
- R. Plechner: Just that it did general work as a judge [IMAGE 10]. Same kind of thing that I did as a lawyer. [laughs]**
- J. Warren: But did you enjoy it more than being a lawyer or no difference?
- R. Plechner: Well, it was easier. You sat there and they came to you. [laughs]**
- J. Warren: Yeah, that's nice. [looks at resume] And so you are a member of the American Legion?
- R. Plechner: Yeah. Stanley got me involved there.**
- J. Warren: Oh, he did? And you are also a member of the Woodwild Park Association.
- R. Plechner: Yeah. Well, Mary Lou is secretary of the Association and we go out and clean the park every day.**
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, secretary. [laughs] Garbage picker-upper.
- J. Warren: Well, I noticed the park is right behind you guys.
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, it's great. We feel very fortunate bordering around the park.
- R. Plechner: All kinds of animals. Yeah, you can get the picture you took yesterday.**
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, it was a couple of days ago. There are baby foxes; the mother, we see the mother in the yard all the time. She's always tracing after the squirrels. Yeah, we hope she catches them. She must catch them periodically. But there are guys working next door (the house next door was sold), and they've been renovating it for some time. And the guys who are working there were in my yard looking under the bushes, and I asked them what they saw and they told me foxes. And I saw one baby fox; yesterday, we saw two. But I'll show you a picture. [leaves to get picture off iPad]
- J. Warren: Oh, it also says that you were on the Board of Directors for the Kiddie Keep Well Camp.
- R. Plechner: Yes, for several years. Stanley was chairman of the Board of Directors.**
- J. Warren: So he got you involved in a lot of these projects?
- R. Plechner: Yes. And I got him involved in a lot of things.**
- J. Warren: What kinds of things did you get him involved with?
- R. Plechner: Oh, I don't even know. I'm lucky if I remember what I was involved with. [laughter] But he was involved in a lot of the Republican things with me.**
- J. Warren: Well, I had mentioned before about you running for Borough Council.

- R. Plechner:** **Yeah, that was way back. And Stanley supported me for that too just whatever we did, did a lot of stuff together.**
- M. L. Plechner: [shows photo of fox in Woodwild Park] Here's the baby fox.
- J. Warren: Oh wow! That's a great picture.
- M. L. Plechner: There are at least two of them. The guys next door told me there were fifty of them, but I think—
- R. Plechner:** **That's seems like an exaggeration, yeah. [laughter]**
- M. L. Plechner: I know they're still working on learning their English numbers. I'm sure there aren't fifty, but there are at least two.
- R. Plechner:** **But then I think that's a neat picture.**
- J. Warren: It's a great picture.
- M. L. Plechner: Not everybody who borders on the park appreciates it. There are plenty of people who just use it to deposit their trash. [laughs] It's a little infuriating actually.
- R. Plechner:** **It's disgusting. It's a better word than infuriating. Both infuriating and disgusting, I guess. People come and dump garbage in the park! And they wouldn't like it if I came and dumped stuff in their yard.**
- J. Warren: So that's what you spend most of your time doing is cleaning?
- M. L. Plechner: Well, we pick up trash. I've been working for some years now on a project documenting the wildlife in the park, so that's what I've spent a lot of my time doing. And of course, we are going into the spring bird migration now, so for the next few days I'm going to try to get out with my camera. And early May is primetime so right now we are going into peak season.
- R. Plechner:** **And this is new, the fox. We've always had a lot of different kinds of animals and this is the first fox we've had.**
- M. L. Plechner: We've had foxes around for a few years.
- R. Plechner:** **Have we?**
- M. L. Plechner: I would say I've seen them for maybe the past three or four years. And they were here during the first year of the [COVID-19] pandemic, I remember because people were excited that someone saw the litter in their yard. Then that year, the adult had mange [skin disease] and that's very sad to see. You know it's some kind of parasite under the skin and it really destroys the animal slowly. It must be an awful, awful thing. But we had a groundhog last year, Gogo. We called it "Gogo the Groundhog" because every time I would try to take a photo, it would go go! [laughs] I haven't seen Gogo this year. I don't know if Gogo moved on or if Gogo doesn't want to be around the fox. So I don't know if foxes eat groundhogs or groundhogs—
- R. Plechner:** **There was a bear here too about—how long ago was that?**

- M. L. Plechner: I missed the bear, I didn't see it. But there was a reporting of one a week or so ago, I think.
- R. Plechner: Well, the one here, I didn't see him here. I saw him down the street when he was in front of Marty Jessen's house [at 191 East Chestnut Avenue]. And he apparently, he was first in the woods from what people told me, didn't see him there. And then he walked down to where I saw him. And by then there was a crowd following him and watching him. [laughs] So he climbed up a tree and people were smart enough, nobody tried to pet him or anything. They would not have been too happy!**
- J. Warren: Oh my gosh. No!
- R. Plechner: And then he climbed down from the tree and walked on down the end of Chestnut. I don't know where he went home or wherever his home is.**
- J. Warren: Oh, so they didn't catch him?
- R. Plechner: No, nobody tried. Well, you couldn't do it unless you had the proper equipment and knew how.**
- J. Warren: Well, you'd have to call Animal Control and they'd have to come in and tranquilize. I didn't know how bad. Obviously, it doesn't look like he was violent or anything.
- R. Plechner: Well, but he would be if you tried to—**
- J. Warren: Well, obviously if you charged it, yeah. [laughs]
- R. Plechner: And then nobody went too close to him, which is good. I would not want to get into a fight with him, that's for sure.**
- J. Warren: No, I'd run in the other direction. So there are a lot of animals in the Woodwild Park?
- R. Plechner: Yeah. We have a quite a few. A lot of little chipmunks, things like that. It's amazing. I'm always saying to Mary Lou that that little bit of—the park is about three and a half acres—that little piece of land has as many animals, as much wildlife as it does.**
- J. Warren: Yeah, and I'm surprised. I think it was the end of a glacier²¹, I guess.
- R. Plechner: Yeah, obviously this whole area. With the animals, there's no place else for them to go. They like the trees and the woods. Where can they go?**
- J. Warren: Yeah, that's true. There's not much wooded area around here anymore.

²¹ According to a 2010 *Nannygoats* article, "Woodwild Park owes its existence to ancient geological events: the Ice Ages. During the most recent glacial period, the ice sheet reached as far as central New Jersey before it receded about 10,000 years ago. The terminal moraine, i.e., the line of irregular mounds of debris that mark the edge of the glacier, runs from Perth Amboy northwesterly through New Jersey and includes the hills in the park and nearby surroundings. The seasonal pond in Woodwild Park is believed to be a kettle hole. Such a hole is formed when a chunk of ice breaks off from a receding glacier, is buried by glacial outwash, and then later melts."

R. Plechner: **Yeah.**

J. Warren: Okay. Well, I want to just end on a couple questions just about your feelings about some of the changes and the growth to Metuchen over the years.

R. Plechner: **Okay.**

J. Warren: So just your impressions. I mean obviously traffic.

R. Plechner: **Traffic is much heavier than it was sixty years ago. We have a lot of apartments we did not have back then. I'm not very fond of the apartment houses. But there they are; they've seen the Council, and the Planning Board seem to be approving these apartment developers' plans all the time.**

M. L. Plechner: It's still the nicest town around, I think.

R. Plechner: **Oh yeah.**

M. L. Plechner: You know there wasn't any violence here during the disturbances in recent years. And I notice they seem to have zero tolerance, sort of like they're practicing broken windows policing here. I know somebody was arrested for doing graffiti tags downtown, just in the past few weeks. And there was a person who was mugged, this was I think a few months ago, an attempted mugging under the bridge, the train station bridge, I think there were four individuals who had taken the train to Metuchen from another town, I don't remember which one. But between the Metuchen and Edison Police, they stopped them and got them all. So it seems to be a great effort to keep peace and calm in the town, I think. So I think we are fortunate that way.

J. Warren: Yeah, I mean you lived here your whole life and I guess you have no desire to leave?

R. Plechner: **Yeah, I can't figure any place else I'd rather live really.**

M. L. Plechner: It would be interesting to see if they ever get movies going again in the Forum²². I wonder how much you'll have to pay if you go back to the Forum, Richard? [laughter] More than twelve cents probably. Actually a few years ago, they were doing first-run movies at the Forum for some time.

R. Plechner: **Well, they always had first-run movies.**

M. L. Plechner: Stanley and June [Lease] used to go. After a period of inactivity, I think they did it and then it was sold.

R. Plechner: **I saw *Gone With The Wind* at the Forum.**

M. L. Plechner: Was that when it came out in the 1930s?

²² The Forum Theatre, which opened in March 1928, was constructed by local businessmen, James Forgione and H.A. Rumler, who named the theatre by combining the first three letters of their last names. The Lowery family had owned the theatre for thirty-seven years before the Borough of Metuchen purchased the Forum Theatre in 2019. The borough plans to incorporate the rehabilitated theater into a new Metuchen Arts District that will convert the abandoned gas station next door into a contemporary indoor-outdoor event space and a dining area called "Spot."

R. Plechner: Yeah, around 1939, I think.

M. L. Plechner: Would it have been then when it was released?

R. Plechner: I probably saw it later when I was going through again, because I would have been too young in 1939. I only would have been six years old or something.

J. Warren: And do you have any other recollections of Metuchen that you want to share?

M. L. Plechner: Did you tell her about Connor's Pond?

R. Plechner: Yes, I told her where I broke my arm. It seems to me I used to go fishing occasionally, but there were no fish. [laughter] If there were, they weren't, have to bite my hook. But for fishing, we'd ride our bikes up to Roosevelt Park usually.

J. Warren: Were you active in any sports?

R. Plechner: No, I'm not the athletic type.

J. Warren: Not your interest?

R. Plechner: Well, you know again, talking about sports, every year they used to have a baseball game between the police and the firemen [IMAGE 11]. And I don't know if they have that today. But back then, it was a big deal. And I went to the game every year and some of the other kids in town. It was a nice thing for the town. That was on the Legion Field, which was over where Campbell School is today. What else can I think of?

Well, the Radio Section was the big development of the day. And that was developed in the 1920s by the Radio Development Corporation.

M. L. Plechner: Which I guess was the technology of the day that was supposed to—

R. Plechner: Yeah, hasn't improved a heck of lot either. [laughs]

M. L. Plechner: They were nice little houses and I think had an architecturally interesting form. They are being knocked down and replaced with houses that look like Fox & Foxx houses today to a large extent.

J. Warren: Yeah. Unfortunately, a lot of the historic homes are being knocked down lately.

R. Plechner: I try to think what else there is.

M. L. Plechner: Do you know how your family picked Metuchen to live in as you were from New York?

R. Plechner: Yes, we went through that already.

M. L. Plechner: Oh, you went through that, okay.

R. Plechner: We used to have—I don’t know what you call them—like pistols that would shoot a dart. I guess dart pistols. We used to play with those, kids in my age group. The dart was a stick about this long.

M. L. Plechner: Sounds very dangerous! [laughs]

R. Plechner: Well, but the front had had a rubber or plastic.

J. Warren: Were these sold or did you make them?

R. Plechner: No, we bought them.

J. Warren: Okay, so you bought them at a store.

R. Plechner: Yeah, I can’t remember which one. And the suction cup on the end here would stick.

J. Warren: Oh yeah!

M. L. Plechner: And what did you shoot at?

J. Warren: Each other.

R. Plechner: Each other, yeah. [laughter] We weren’t supposed to. We were told at school you can’t do that. Our parents told us you can’t do that. So of course, we did it.

J. Warren: Did you get into a lot of trouble as a kid?

R. Plechner: No, I don’t think so. Not that I can recall. The biggest trouble was getting me to do my homework.

J. Warren: Were you a fan of school or not so much?

R. Plechner: No, not so much.

M. L. Plechner: In Peddie, you tell me a story about some person in charge sneaking up on you to find you reading unauthorized—you were supposed to be doing schoolwork.

R. Plechner: Oh yeah, Mr. Carbor [phonetic].

M. L. Plechner: But it wasn’t like it was girlie magazines or something. What was it?

R. Plechner: Well, they didn’t have those at the time.

M. L. Plechner: Yeah, it was like literature or something.

R. Plechner: No. I don’t know what it was. Maybe they’re books.

M. L. Plechner: That weren’t important for your schoolwork.

R. Plechner: They were not ones that were assigned. For some reason, I had a bias against assigned material. [laughter] But yeah, he would come upstairs and catch you

reading something that you were not supposed to be reading. In other words, they had an hour or an hour and a half, whatever it was, at night where you couldn't visit anybody. You had to be in your room and doing your homework. And the way we would do that was we'd open the drawer in the middle of the desk (the desk in the rooms had drawers there), and sit back and read and we would hear him coming, just go forward like that and the door would close and we'd have a schoolbook on the desk.

M. L. Plechner: Didn't you tell me he took his shoes off or something so he could sneak up on everybody? [laughs]

R. Plechner: Yeah, he would try and get us by taking one shoe off. And he could run up the stairs that way and sound like he's walking slowly up. [laughter] But that was at Peddie, that wasn't here.

J. Warren: Well, I guess I'll close and ask you, do you have any words of advice from your long life that you want to pass on?

R. Plechner: Not really. Drink lots of scotch, it's good for your health. [laughter]

M. L. Plechner: Kills all the germs. Except you're not allowed to drink anymore.

R. Plechner: No. [laughter] There's a spy in the family that catches me. [laughter]

J. Warren: But you feel like you've accomplished everything that you wanted to do?

R. Plechner: Oh, I don't know. I think I suppose. Never gave it much thought. I just assumed I would be practicing law the rest of my life. My life has gotten too long for that. I worked until when? About five years, six years ago.

M. L. Plechner: Until you couldn't walk down the hallway in the courthouse anymore.

R. Plechner: Trying to think—nothing really—the weirdest cases I had usually involved criminal cases, and most of them I couldn't put in a public source.

J. Warren: But you didn't have many local clients or just very minor cases?

R. Plechner: Well, basically you're getting your clients when you are in practice from all around the county. There are not enough in just Metuchen to support a couple of lawyers. I've had some really weird clients and really weird cases, but you wouldn't want to put them in a paper or anything.

The last murder case I had—well, I better not say because it would be too easy to find. I don't want to do anything that's a violation of any ethics.

J. Warren: Yeah, I understand.

R. Plechner: And if I mention a case that was weird, it might not be too difficult for somebody to find out who it was. That's the problem. A lot of them got covered in the *Daily Home News*, which no longer exists. I think it's merged with the *Star-Ledger* [unclear]?

- M. L. Plechner: No, it's the *Home News Tribune*.
- R. Plechner: No, I meant that merger. But then I think they merged again.**
- M. L. Plechner: Did they?
- R. Plechner: Maybe not, I don't know.**
- J. Warren: Well, can you mention any interesting political stories or do you want to stay away from that too?
- R. Plechner: Well, political I can. Political wasn't as interesting as some of the criminal stories. [chuckles] I can't think of anything political. I was always a conservative and always supported the Republicans, and primarily because both my parents were conservative Republicans.**
- M. L. Plechner: There's a photo of you shaking hands with Ronald Reagan at the White House when he was President [IMAGE 12]. Did he know you were a phony copilot when you got there? [laughs]
- R. Plechner: No, I don't think so. I can remember meeting him; I don't think he remembers meeting me. [laughter] You know what, maybe you can go into the library and finish with some pictures.**
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, I'll show Jennifer if want to see [IMAGES 13 and 14].
- J. Warren: Okay.
- R. Plechner: Why don't you do that and then if you have any questions I could answer—I just have trouble walking from here over to there.**
- J. Warren: Well, I'll close it off and just say thank you again for taking the time to give your recollections about Metuchen. We really do appreciate it.
- R. Plechner: Well, I'm glad you're interested.**
- M. L. Plechner: Thank you, Jennifer. Thank you for your involvement in keeping the history of Metuchen alive. Did you want this? This is the one I'm going to make a copy of and email to you. Did you get the resume? Did you give Jennifer the resume, Richard?
- R. Plechner: I don't know. That would have been my mother's.**
- M. L. Plechner: No, it was six pages.
- R. Plechner: Oh yeah, I had it here. Let me see.**
- M. L. Plechner: Did you pick it up maybe in this—is it under your clipboard?
- J. Warren: Possibly? Yeah.
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, there it is. Okay. You can have that if you want for some reason.

- J. Warren: Well, I don't know whether I want to—do you guys want to keep this? I could just take a photograph of the pages.
- M. L. Plechner: No, go ahead and take it. We updated it for you today.
- J. Warren: Okay. Yeah, this would be great to include²³. Okay.
- R. Plechner: Oh, you know what else? This is not much of a story. But we (by we, I mean me and Bobby Meshanic or Bobby Heroy [Thomas Robert Heroy] or one of the other kids in my age group) used to like to walk down the railroad. There's a railroad behind these buildings way over.**
- J. Warren: Oh, the Port Reading Railroad?
- R. Plechner: Yeah, and it runs into the Lehigh Valley, I think. [looks out window to person walking dog on East Chestnut Avenue] Oh, there's Maggie's friend, the little dog.**
- M. L. Plechner: That's Rosie.
- R. Plechner: That's Rosie's dog. We had Maggie (Maggie was our little cairn terrier). She died a few weeks ago.**
- M. L. Plechner: It was actually last April. It was about a year ago.
- R. Plechner: Was it that long ago?**
- M. L. Plechner: Yeah, time flies, yeah.
- R. Plechner: Yeah. Anyway, where was I?**
- Audience: Oh, you were talking about the railroad.
- R. Plechner: About railroad, walking along there and there are never any trains on it. I shouldn't say never, but there are rarely trains on it. And one day I was walking along, I think with Bobby Meshanic, but I'm not sure, maybe with Jackie Hill, or one of the other kids, and the train pulled up behind us and we weren't paying that much attention and the train blew the whistle for us to get out of the way. Scared the heck out of me, but we are diving into the bushes next to the tracks. That was behind St. Joe's [Saint Joseph High School at 145 Plainfield Avenue] down there. There's just not much that I can talk about anymore. Okay.**

[END OF INTERVIEW]

²³ Mr. Plechner's resume is attached to the end of this transcription.

INTERVIEW IMAGES

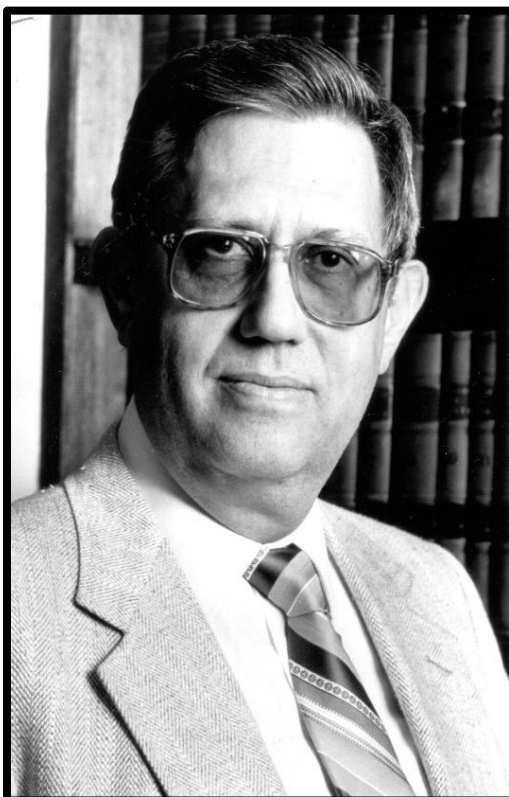


IMAGE 01: Portrait of Richard Plechner for his nomination as a Superior Court Judge for the State of New Jersey. Photograph taken from the *Home News Tribune* Morgue Collection, December 2, 1988.



IMAGE 02: Historic view of 57 Library Place (formerly Walnut Place), the childhood home of Richard Plechner during the 1930s and early 1940s. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, December 2, 1932.



IMAGE 03: Portrait of Dr. Sophie (Coppersmith) Plechner, the mother of Richard Plechner. Mrs. Plechner was a technical consultant and associate director of research for Carter-Wallace Products. She worked there for more than thirty years and officially retired in 1976. Photograph taken from the *Home News Tribune* Morgue Collection, May 8, 1987.



IMAGE 04: Historic view of 27 Hillside Avenue, a two-family house that Richard Plechner's mother rented following the death of his father in 1943. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, October 27, 1932.



IMAGE 05: Historic view of 62 Oak Avenue at the southeast corner with East Chestnut Avenue. Mr. Plechner bought the house in 1962 and has remained here until present day. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, November 5, 1932.



IMAGE 06: View of the first electric car in Metuchen along Middlesex Avenue that was owned by Sarah Coerr at 300 Middlesex Avenue. Photograph is from the collection of Chief Fred Hall and was donated by Daniel Granato



IMAGE 07: Historic view of store at 581 Middlesex Avenue, located diagonally across from Franklin School. The sign shows that the building sold candy, soda, and cigars. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, May 21, 1937.



IMAGE 08: Historic view of 351 Main Street, the former law office of Richard Plechner. Mr. Plechner rented the office from Martin Jessen, a prominent local resident and owner of Victorian Office Rentals in Metuchen. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, August 12, 1932.

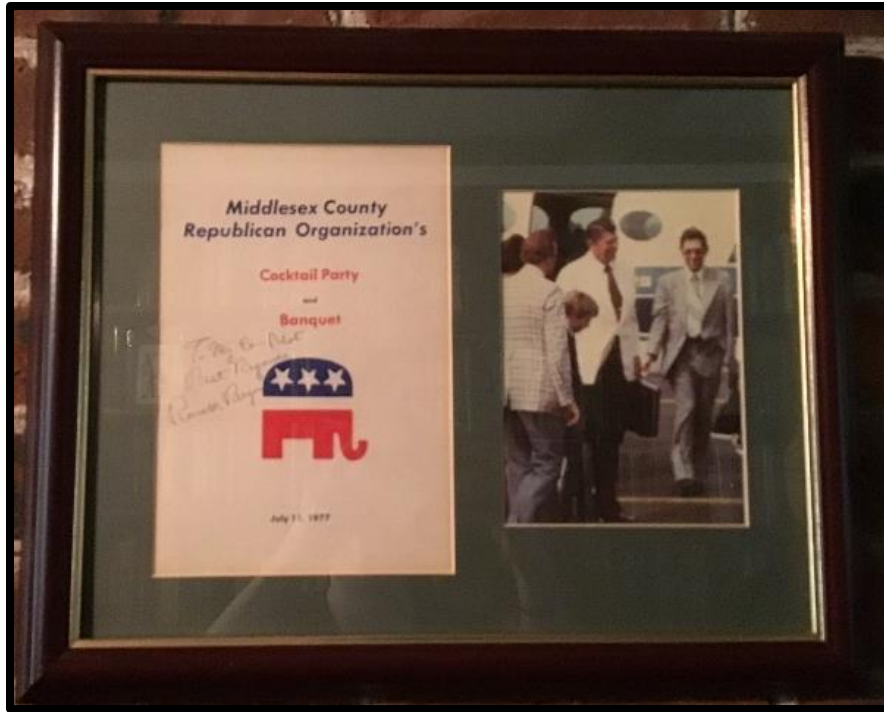


IMAGE 09: Framed picture of Richard Plechner walking with Ronald Reagan off a plane with an autographed program for the Middlesex County Republican Organization's Cocktail Party and Banquet, July 11, 1977. Ronald Reagan's autograph is addressed to Mr. Plechner as "To My Co-Pilot, Best Regards, Ronald Reagan." The framed picture is located in the library of Mr. Plechner's house. Photograph taken by Jennifer Warren, April 21, 2022.

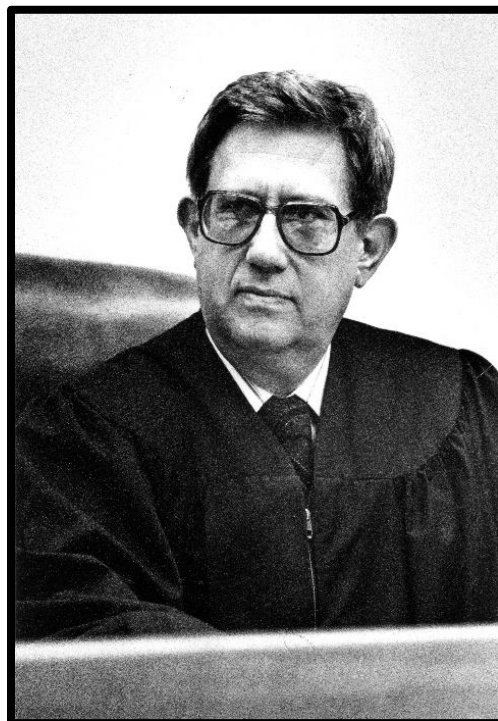


IMAGE 10: Portrait of Richard Plechner sitting on the bench as a Superior Court Judge for the State of New Jersey. Photograph taken from the *Home News Tribune* Morgue Collection, December 23, 1990.



IMAGE 11: View of a baseball game between the Metuchen Fire Department and the Metuchen Police Department at Legion Field along Durham Avenue in Metuchen. This annual event was a local tradition for many years in Metuchen. Photograph taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead, September 5, 1932.



IMAGE 12: Framed picture of Richard Plechner shaking hands with President Ronald Reagan at the White House. The framed picture is located in the library of Mr. Plechner's house. Photograph taken by Jennifer Warren, April 21, 2022.



IMAGE 13: View of various medals awarded to Richard Plechner during his life. The medals are on display in the library of Mr. Plechner's house. Photograph taken by Jennifer Warren, April 21, 2022.



IMAGE 14: View of military medals awarded to Richard Plechner as a U.S. Army Reserve. The medals are on display at Mr. Plechner's house. Photograph taken by Jennifer Warren, April 21, 2022.