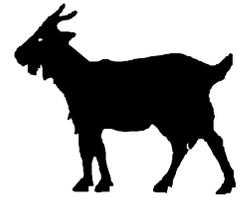


Nannygoats



Vol. 3 Issue 1

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Winter 2005

Voices from the Past

With the support of a grant from the Middlesex Country Cultural and Heritage Commission, the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society has begun transcribing tapes of oral history interviews conducted with local residents in the 1970s. The excerpt below is from the transcription of an interview with Grace Halsey in 1976. A life-long Metuchen resident, Halsey was a Metuchen librarian from 1920-1969. She speaks about Metuchen Public Library activities from the original location on Washington Place to the current location, as well as growing up in Metuchen. Miss Halsey was born at 64 Home Street, and was still living there at the time of the interview.

...I was born in this house, which was the property of my great grandfather on my mother's side. He owned the entire corner from Home Street to Valley Street, which was nothing more than a cart track through to an apple orchard at the Amboy Avenue end of the lane.



64 Home Street in 1932

...As a small child, about 9 or 10

I suppose, on Sunday afternoons my mother and I used to walk over to Woodwild Park, a small hill area about where Mr. Hammesfahr's house now stands. Just beyond his house, two stone pillars still stand with a metal plate and a name, Woodwild Park. A path went up the hill between these pillars and at the top, seats were made of boards stretched between trees. There we would sit and watch the infrequent cars go by. On Saturday my mother would have bought a 5 cent bag of peanuts and when a car went by going toward New York, I could have a peanut. And when one went by going toward New Brunswick, she could have one. Needless to say, a small bag of peanuts would be more than enough for a couple of hours.

...I was a retiring child and hated parties until the refreshments were served. The one exception...was a party given each summer by Mrs. Howard Bloomfield for her daughter, Eleanor. The Bloomfield estate was a beautiful white-pillared house set in extensive

grounds. The house has since been torn down but it stood on the right going toward Perth Amboy just beyond [Grandview Avenue]....I remember there were boys as well as girls....All I remember is the ride down and the ride back and one ride stands out in particular because Helen Corbin and I were sitting at the back with our feet hanging out over the back of the hay wagon and she lost one of her slippers which created a great furor.

...Memorial Day or as it was then called Decoration Day, is another memory. The local children would gather at the Presbyterian Church each bringing as many flowers as they could come by. We would then go over to the Colonial Cemetery and then to the Presbyterian Cemetery, leaving flowers on the graves of the Civil War soldiers, which had been marked with small flags. I always tried to hang on to my flowers until we got to my grandfather's grave. He had joined the Union Army against his father's wishes and had been disinherited. But when the word came home that he had been killed, all was forgiven and my great grandfather went down with a coffin to bring the body home, only to find that like Mark Twain, the report of his death had been greatly exaggerated. And he lived for twenty-five or so more years.



Bloomfield Mansion, circa 1900

In 1929, Dr. David Trumbull Marshall published a small volume of reminiscences called Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen. Reprinted several times since then, the book contains memories of persons, events, and experiences of Marshall's days as a youngster in the local area. The excerpt below is Trumbull's memory of Clarkson's Grocery Store, originally located at the corner of Main Street and the Middlesex and Essex Turnpike (now Route 27).

At Clarkson's store they sold pretty much everything from salt mackerel to paper collars....In the backroom were the usual assortment of kerosene barrels, salt mackerel barrels, molasses barrels and dried salt codfish, each vying with the other for supremacy in odors....In the body of the store there were barrels of brown sugar and soda crackers....The brown sugar was dispensed wrapped in coarse brown paper and while the sugar was being wrapped a fellow could swipe a lump, not like now, when the sugar comes done up in a tight box.

...How I did love the old-fashioned loaves of bread!...The loaves were baked in blocks and as one loaf was broken from the block there was a big surface of flaky bread from which a boy could peel off quite a lot without it being missed too much.

The soda crackers from a fresh barrel certainly were crisp and snappy, but later when they had been subjected to the prolonged

treatment with tobacco smoke from the crowd that used to "set" around the old pot-stove they were not so good.

When by good fortune I could get my hands on a penny I could buy sour-balls or Jujube paste fishes....Sour-balls were considered an economical buy for they were too big to go between one's teeth and so hard that they could last a long time in the mouth....Jujube paste particularly, when a bit stale, compared favorably with rubber for lasting qualities.

Clarkson's store was built shortly after Middlesex and Essex Turnpike was put through, about 1810....Some time about 1890 the building was moved a little east of its old location on the corner.

Copies of Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen are available for purchase from the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. Call curator Marie Vajo at 732-985-3217 for copies.



The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society was founded in 1974 with the primary purpose of promoting an interest in and appreciation of the history of the Borough of Metuchen and of Edison Township.

From the President...

Dear Members,

Happy New Year! The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society has just held its annual meeting, elected new Board members and officers, and kicked off our new year.

As an organization, we have a core group of dedicated Board members and volunteers, but we'd like to get more members involved. How can you help? First, as you renew your membership for this year, please consider upgrading to a higher level as our expenses continue to grow each year. To date, approximately one-third of renewing members have renewed at a higher level and we certainly appreciate that support!

In addition, each of these committees is looking for new members:

- **Public Outreach:** Develop new programs, write articles for the newsletter, develop new publications, and assist with displays.
- **Public Relations:** Write and circulate press releases and flyers.

- **Oral History:** Assist with the transcription of existing tapes, suggest new candidates to be interviewed, and help with the interviews.

We are now in our second year of transcribing approximately 36 hours of oral history interviews with "ordinary" Metuchen residents in the late 1970s.

- **Membership:** Maintain and expand our current membership.
- **Fundraising:** Develop creative ways to financially support the Society.

It is one of my main goals to develop our committees and involve more of the Society's members on these committees. I ask that as a member, you give serious consideration to becoming more active in the Society.

If you can join us, please call me at 732-549-6798. I'd love to hear from you.

Nancy Zerbe



2005 Officers Elected at Annual Meeting

On Sunday, January 30, 2005, the general membership of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society elected officers for 2005. They are:

President – Nancy Zerbe
Vice President – Robert Takash
Treasurer – David Gaskill
Recording Secretary – Rebecca Seely
Corresponding Secretary – Tyreen Reuter.

The following were newly elected to the Board of Trustees: Kevin Hale, James Halpin, James Halsey, and Rebecca Seely. Trustees Anna Eosso and Marge Viquerat were re-elected to the Board. Trustees continuing their terms are: Phyllis Boedinghaus, Steve Reuter, and Marie Vajo.

President Nancy Zerbe thanked retiring trustees Barbara Barbano, April Cormaci, Ellen Miller, Sylvia Taylor, and N. Ann Walker for their service to the Society.

Elections were followed by a presentation by Dolores Powell entitled "Reminiscences." Powell offered lively reminders of life in the 1920s through the 1940s, including recalling events, songs, radio programs, prices, games, and everyday activities.

Direct on-line access to Historical Society information, newsletters, and historic photos posted by trustee Jim Halpin is now available! Log on to:
www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

Long-Time Metuchen Businessmen Pass Away

On October 9, 2004, Morris Zuts, 99, died at his home in Metuchen. Zuts moved to the United States from Poland in the 1920s, settling in Metuchen in 1923. According to his obituary in the *Home News Tribune*, October 10, 2004, the first store he owned was on Main Street and sold produce. His later establishment became an institution in Metuchen-- Morris Stores at the corner of Main and New Streets.

Morris Stores was founded by Morris Zuts and his brothers Herman, William, and Irving. The Zuts brothers operated the up-scale department store from 1948-1995, during which they made many contributions to the community.



In September 1995, the Metuchen Chamber of Commerce recognized the Zuts brothers for their long and dedicated service to the Metuchen business community. When Morris Stores closed in October 1995, the local area lost one of its most successful and enduring retail establishments.

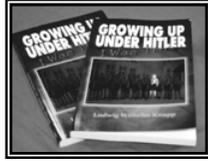
On December 18, 2004, Benjamin Dessel, 86, died at his home in The Bronx, New York. Dessel spent most of his life in Metuchen, where he and his brothers owned and operated the Metuchen Food Market, later Metuchen Food and Liquors. Dessel served as a director of the Metuchen Savings Bank until suffering a stroke in the late 1990s.

Growing Up Under Hitler – He Was There!

by Tyreen Reuter

In November 2004, the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society sponsored an autobiographical presentation by Clark resident Ludwig Wilhelm Knapp, where he recounted some of his experiences in Germany as a child and young adult during the years surrounding World War II. The program highlighted some of the stories from Knapp's book, "Growing Up Under Hitler – I Was There!" and was covered extensively in the November 16, 2004, issue of *The Sentinel*. German language articles on display covered his recent trip to the reunited country, where he related his experiences to German schoolchildren.

Knapp was born in Dormagen, a small town about 15 miles north of Köln, Germany, in 1930. His father was a contractor who worked on the Maginot Line, in a unit serving as an equivalent to the American "Seabees," but was drafted into the German Army to build fortifications along the Russian front. His mother, distraught over the disappearance of one of her closest friends (who was Jewish) and overwhelmed with raising two children alone during a difficult time, committed suicide when Knapp was nine. With his



The cover of Knapp's book features a photograph of the author as a young boy in a Hitler Youth camp

mother deceased and his father stationed far from home, Knapp's sister was evacuated to Eastern Germany, and he was sent to a Kinderlandverschickung (KLV) camp, or Hitler Youth camp, in the Ore Mountains, near the Sudetenland for two years. In 1943, while still stationed on the Russian front, his father remotely married a German woman, which allowed Knapp and his sister to return to Dormagen to live with their new stepmother.

Although glad to be home, Knapp remembers it as a time of constant air raids and nighttime bombings.

On his father's advice, Knapp took an electrician's apprentice position at Bayer, but soon after was also drafted into the German Army to make trenches and tank traps along the border with Holland. In 1954, he was able to emigrate from Germany to America, where he served for many years in the American Military.

Following the presentation, Knapp answered questions from the audience, some of whom are Mr. Knapp's age and experienced World War II from a very different position here in the United States. Most of the audience's questions dealt with his experiences in the KLV camp and his time in the German Army.

"Light Dispelling Darkness" Fountain Renovated

The terracotta and concrete, Art-Deco fountain in Roosevelt Park near Grandview Ave. and Pine Dr. is a monument to Thomas Edison and the improvements in people's lives made possible by his perfection of the incandescent electric light. It was designed by sculptor Waylande Gregory, and built by Gregory and ten other sculptors as a WPA project in 1937. In November 2004, a complete mechanical and artistic renovation of the fountain was dedicated, and water flowed from the fountain for the first time in many years. Middlesex County paid for almost all of the \$403,000 renovation costs. The Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission conducted the research necessary to ensure that the famous sculpture was restored appropriately.

Published by
Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
P.O. Box 61, Metuchen, NJ 08840
April Cormaci, Editor

Board of Trustees
Nancy Zerbe, President
Robert Takash, Vice President
David Gaskill, Treasurer
Rebecca Seely, Recording Secretary
Tyreen Reuter, Corresponding Secretary
Marie Vajo, Curator

Phyllis Boeddinghaus James Halpin
Anna Eosso James Halsey
Kevin Hale Steve Reuter
Marge Viquerat

The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

The name of the newsletter, "Nannygoats," is taken from the title of a collection of anecdotes, reminiscences, articles, and letters compiled by photographer J. Lloyd Grimstead. He took more than 2,800 photographs of the Metuchen-Edison area, mostly during the 1930s, which make up 80 percent of the Historical Society's photographic collection. *The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society dedicates this publication to Lloyd Grimstead, as a way of honoring him for collecting and recording so much of our local history.*

110 Years Ago

A NEW SUBURB

The New Village of Linden Makes a Start.

A new village has been laid out as a suburb to Highland Park. It is known as Linden and is situated on the Piscataway road, between Piscataway town and Highland Park. At present there are 12 houses in the village and Jacob Baker is building another. The Mayor of the village is Fritz Bauer, and the Town Clerk is Mark Conway. The village has a wagon works owned by Jacob Baker. Fritz Bauer says he will start a sauer kraut factory if this year's cabbage crop proves to be a profitable one. There are all the comforts required in this village, which is a "dry town" and requires no constable. No water works are required as there is a fine spring which flows into a natural basin.

from the *Daily Times* of June 14, 1894

95 Years Ago

The Home Realty Co. of New Brunswick had a full-page ad offering building sites at property known as **Lindenau Terrace** located "ONE MINUTE ONLY from the Highland Park Borough Line" by trolley. Lot prices ranged from \$16 to \$60. The ad notes that the property is "Now In the 'Rough.'" But "STREETS WILL BE PUT THROUGH AT ONCE." For those interested in a bigger deal, Home Realty offered to "build you a 6-room Bungalow, plastered, papered and with two coats of paint for \$600."

from *The Daily Home News* of August 6, 1909

Copies of newspaper articles donated by Jeanne Kolva.

"Unlacing the Victorian Woman"

N.J. Council on the Humanities speaker Barbara Darlin will discuss Victorian customs and etiquette at 1:30 p.m., Thursday, February 17, at the Old Franklin School, 491 Middlesex Avenue, Metuchen. This program is sponsored by the Metuchen Borough Improvement League.

Mystery Solved!



Back row, left to right: Mrs. Carl Reitenback, Mrs. Norman Vroom, Mrs. James Quackenbush, Mrs. Lee Testa, Mrs. William Cicio. *Middle row, left to right:* Mrs. Evelyn Smith, Mrs. Sophie Jensen, Mrs. Elsie Henderson, Mrs. Florence Bennet. *Front row, left to right:* Mrs. Helen Bergman, Mrs. Lee Nogan.

Through the persistence and resourcefulness of the Historical Society's own "Sherlock Holmes," trustee Phyllis Boeddinghaus, the ladies at the left have finally been identified! Their picture appeared in the spring 2004 *Nannygoats* with a request for information about the group.

According to unearthed newspaper articles, the Old Girls Orchestra was composed of 15 members of the Clara Barton Woman's Club. The group made music from ordinary kitchen utensils, and was seen frequently around the area circa 1950, including giving concerts at Camp Kilmer and appearing in local variety shows. One of their concerts was photographed by *Life* magazine for a pictorial feature!

Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
P.O. Box 61
Metuchen, NJ 08840