

East Brandywine Township Oral History Project

Interviewer(s): Alexandria Proko and Carol Sinex-Schmidt

Interviewee(s): Robert and Nancy Thompson

Interview Date: February 1, 2020

Allie: For the audio, though we already did introductions, if you could please state your names?

Bob: Robert G. Thompson and Nancy A. Thompson.

Allie: What was your maiden name?

Nancy: Heckman. H-E-C-K-M-A-N.

Allie: Alright, thanks.

Bob: We came into East Brandywine Township about 1964—I think that was the year.

Nancy: 1965.

Bob: We've lived in the same house since then.

Allie: So you never moved. You stayed in the same house.

Bob: Never moved, no.

Nancy: We bought it from Joseph and Mary Stringer.

Allie: Okay.

Carol: And that's on North Buck Road.

Bob: 354 North Buck Road. We're 3/10ths of a mile off of North Buck Road. The driveway is 2/10ths of a mile off.

Allie: Okay.

Bob: It accommodates three families.

Nancy: There's a fork in the driveway.

Bob: The third family was put in there after we moved there. It was a subdivision of the adjacent property.

Allie: Do you know if the whole property was owned by the Stinger's, or was it always two separate houses?

Bob: Separate. One of the Stringers was the daughter of—I have a list here of the ownership.

Allie: Oh, great! (Note: This document is in our possession now.)

Nancy: She was the daughter of Barney Reed.

Allie: Wow, this goes back to the 1700s.

Bob: Yeah. The main property was everything from the cemetery for Hopewell Church, and I'm not sure how far it went, but it went down towards Guthriesville. It says there who owned it originally, and who bought it and what other properties sprung off of it.

Allie: It's interesting. It says here that in the 1800s it might have been owned by Hannah Guthrie, who was married to William Guthrie, possibly of Guthriesville. That's neat.

Bob: I thought that it might help. That corner of East Brandywine Township where North Buck and Hopewell Road are—that was passed down. Somewhere along the way Popjoy owned it and farmed it. It was mostly farmland around here. There were only about four or five houses down there when we moved down there. Some of these later ones came, like Summer Hill Drive. That was all open farmland at some point. Part of that when we moved here was owned by Colonel McFarland. We

had another piece of paper that had a little note on it when she talked to Stringer, and it said that he wasn't a Colonel, just a Major.

Laughter

Bob: He temporarily owned where Taraschi lives. When we moved here, it was owned by Mildred Monroe.

Allie: I see her name here.

Bob: Yeah. A gentleman was Ernie Land, and I think he was married to her. I'm not sure how it happened that when the Colonel bought it, it ended up with Taraschi.

Carol: Who is living in the house that the Colonel was in?

Nancy: The one that you see as you turn onto North Buck Road? It's not occupied.

Carol: I didn't think it would be.

Nancy: Technically, it hasn't. There haven't been realtors in there. What do you call somebody who just moves in? Not renters.

Allie: Squatters.

Nancy: Squatters, yes.

Bob: Occasionally there have been squatters there.

Nancy: It's not occupied now.

Carol: I saw that somebody worked on the barn.

Nancy: Oh, yeah. They put up a new barn or repaired it.

Carol: The house doesn't look like it's been touched.

Nancy: It was probably done by the Colonel's nephew.

Bob: Yeah. The new addition or reconstruction of the garage was done by the Colonel's nephew not too long ago.

Carol: Right, that's what I remember.

Bob: The Colonel was a McFarland. He would quite often say that he owned everything there, that it was all his property. Although, we've had a deed in the right-of-way that says the property we own was landlocked. When the Colonel got huffy about it, Joseph Stringer had our driveway surveyed and deeded as a right-of-way. A 16-foot right-of-way from our property out to North Buck. It's listed in the courthouse someplace—I've got a copy of it. It says that the actual owners of the property aren't actually obligated to do any work to the driveway or anything like that, but they can't use it either.

Nancy: He put up a small cottage.

Bob: That was put up by Monroe or someone who owned the property before the Colonel bought it. I'm not sure exactly about that. Someone put up a small one-bedroom building very close to our property. That was a caretaker's cottage. I think something about it might be mentioned in the paper there.

Allie: It says that there was a smaller house on the land bought from someone's father. Way back in the 1800s.

Bob: Right, way back. It was when there was still a lot of farming. Mildred Monroe did a lot of landscaping stuff. There are still remnants of her work there. That property—one edge of it and one edge of ours—the full length of the property on that particular span was Taraschi's.

Allie: The smaller house that you mentioned, did you hear of that through research, or was it still standing when you moved there?

Nancy: No, it burned down. I don't remember what year. It was occupied by Bob Lang and his wife/partner. They were not injured.

Carol: Now, how are they related to Evert Lang?

Nancy: I don't know.

Bob: Bob Lang's father was Ernie Lang, who was the spouse of Mildred Monroe, who owned that property. Ernie Lang—I'm taxing my memory.

Carol: I know Francis suggested that we interview Evert Lang. I've not been successful in reaching him. There was an Evert Lang who was an accountant.

Bob: I've never heard of him.

Nancy: It would be helpful if you had a land map.

Carol: Yeah, it would be.

Bob: Ernie Lang owned part of or was living in one of the properties. There is one old—what I'd refer to as the master house for the property—on the north end of North Buck Road. There's one large house.

Nancy: Stone.

Bob: Bob Lang lived there for a while. That's just my way back memories.

Allie: Going back to you mentioning moving here, where did you move from?

Nancy: Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Allie: Did you grow up in New Jersey?

Nancy: No. We're Midwesterners. We met in college.

Bob: She was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. I was born and raised near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We met in college in Ohio.

Nancy: After he had served in the army. He went from high school to the army, and then he was advised by his church to go to a college in Ohio. It was a Baptist college. My parents had graduated from that college. They sent me there too.

Bob: I was a senior when she was a freshman. So, there was a magnet or something that kept me there, and the next year we got married. Our oldest son was born out there. The company I was working for transferred me out to Barrington, New Jersey. I worked for them for 13 years, and then I decided enough was enough. I was offered a position in Downingtown with a company that had a subsidiary plant in Downingtown. It looked good, so we moved here.

Carol: What was the company?

Bob: Owen's x Fiberglass. The company in Downingtown was Beloit Eastern. I responded very quickly to my job offer with them. My experience was in the electrical field as a supervisor for electrical maintenance in New Jersey. They wanted someone to do similar type things for Beloit.

Allie: Did you study electrical work? Is that what you went to college for?

Nancy: No.

Bob: Now we open up the big secret.

Laughter

Nancy: He was a theater art major.

Carol: Oh my gosh, what a difference.

Nancy: He lit the stages.

Bob: I was a stage electrician.

Allie: I'm glad I asked. Unraveling secrets!

Nancy: What is your career?

Allie: I'm an event planner, but I went to school for anthropology and archaeology, so I know all about doing something aside from what you studied.

Bob: I went with the intention of doing math or physics. Then they needed someone to help out with stage lighting, and that was the end of that.

Allie: Nancy, what were you studying?

Nancy: I didn't finish college. We married, so I didn't go to college anymore. When I was getting out of the college, the professor who handled it told me that I went to get my M.R.S.

Allie: That's funny!

Nancy: I took a lot of math classes. I was taking the basic classes and hadn't established a major. I got married and had children.

Bob: She'd started to work with the theater, too. Mostly in scenery, wasn't it?

Nancy: I was painting the set.

Allie: So, set design?

Nancy: Set design, yes. He was up in the box in the ceiling doing the lighting, and I was on the stage sweeping and painting. That's how we met. He had holes in his socks and I offered to darn them.

Laughter

Carol: Oh, that's great!

Allie: What year did you get married?

Nancy: 1953.

Allie: Okay. Good for you!

Bob: The experience I had from my first job carried into my second one, and then carried over to here. I ended up with Roy F. Westin in West Chester doing the same type of thing but closer to engineering and design. I also did trouble shooting for the electrical and control systems. I figured I was doing okay with it, so that's my personal history.

Carol: How did you find Pennsylvania compared to the Midwest?

Allie: You went from the Midwest to Jersey, first.

Nancy: The East Coast is not as friendly. Friendly is the only word I can use to explain it kindly.

Carol: I have a friend from Colorado who said the same thing.

Allie: Going down South is similar; everyone says hello to you. Coming from this area where everyone has tunnel vision and minds their business and is not interacting, you're taken aback.

Nancy: Right, when you make eye contact with someone here, you look away or look down. You don't say, "Good morning." In the Midwest, you would.

Bob: In the Midwest, if you have a new neighbor, you would always go over to introduce yourself and bring a pie or something like that. We did that quite often.

Nancy: For all the new houses along North Buck and so forth.

Bob: We had one, and someone asked how much we wanted for it.

Allie: Oh, they thought you were soliciting?

Bob: Yeah!

Carol: Oh my gosh.

Bob: The prime thing that I do every chance that I get, and every day I go out and walk at least a mile and three quarters on the Struble Trail. There's a certain part of the trail—and I've heard from rangers and so forth—that the section of the Struble Trail of any of the trail systems in Chester County is the most friendly.

Carol: Oh, really?

Bob: We have quite a few people from other places.

Carol: What part of the Struble Trail do you walk?

Bob: The north end. From the old paper mill down to where Dowlin's Forge breaks off.

Nancy: Does anyone else use the walking trail?

Allie: I haven't in years, but I'd go in on the other side where the pond and parking lot are in Downingtown.

Nancy: May I tell them about your bench?

Bob: Yeah. You go ahead.

Nancy: For his ninetieth birthday our four children bought him a bench that's been installed on the Struble Trail.

Bob: With a plaque.

Nancy: With a plaque in his honor.

Allie: That's so neat!

Nancy: That's his bench. We have one son who lives at a Downingtown address. We have two others in Oregon, and the other is in Virginia. They aren't here often. We are accumulating pictures of the children and Bob sitting on the bench as they come to visit.

Allie: So, you've been walking there for quite a while then?

Bob: Since 1995, so I guess 26 years, or something like that. I've been walking there daily. I started two years after I retired. I worked temporarily for two years and during that time I walked occasionally at Exton Mall in that area where you can walk in a circle. When I started walking outside on the Struble Trail, anytime there was too much snow or it was really rainy, I'd go back. I walked this morning.

Allie: It was a little foggy this morning.

Carol: And icy.

Bob: Oh, yeah. Our son picked me up to take me over there, and he said if we'd gone any earlier he'd have told me to forget it because he wouldn't have made it over.

Nancy: He carries dog biscuits in his pocket, and the dogs know him.

Bob: Not all of the dogs, but there are four of them. One especially can spot me; he sees me coming and he gets excited. He comes up and you don't hear it really, but I can quietly tell him to sit, or his master can tell him to, and down he goes.

Allie: He knows what's coming!

Bob: He knows. He sits there, but you can tell he wants me to hurry up. There are about three others that know I have treats. They start tugging on their leashes.

Nancy: Their poor owners get dragged up to Bob.

Laughter

Allie: Good for you, it's a good habit to have.

Carol: When you lived in the Midwest, did you live in the city or the country?

Nancy: City.

Carol: The reason I ask is that when my parents moved out here to Lyndell from Philadelphia, they said that people were not friendly at all. I wonder if it's the country people more so. I don't know. My parents were saying that they felt they'd have had to be here three generations to be accepted.

Allie: Well, you said from the Midwest you moved to Cherry Hill. It was probably not as built up as it is now, but still busy. Right?

Bob: We were in a new development.

Nancy: We were in a brand-new development. We were first owners.

Bob: There were still dozens of open lots.

Nancy: There was a farm right across the street from us. We were on the edge of that.

Allie: Was it different coming from there to here?

Bob: A little. There, we were starting out by socializing locally with other people who were just moving in.

Carol: Right, people weren't there for generations like East Brandywine.

Bob: When we moved out here, we were back in the woods. We had some local people. Quite often, we got to know people by friends of our kids.

Allie: Yeah.

Bob: They had this whole new environment in Downingtown.

Nancy: Our first-born was ten years old. Our youngest child was two years old.

Carol: Were you involved in church at all when you came out here?

Nancy: Our daughter, our third child, did join Hopewell Methodist Church.

Carol: The reason I ask is that when I was growing up here, that was a big place of socialization. A lot of your social activities were through church.

Bob: My job with Beloit had a lot of travel, going out to sell a piece of equipment and put it some place, and once it was set up, someone had to show them how it worked.

Allie: Sort of like training.

Bob: A little like training. One of the first projects I had was going down to Houston to a paper mill. Beloit Eastern had sold them a piece of equipment to put wrapping around rolls of paper and they couldn't get it to work right. I had to go down there and find out if something was wrong with the controlled design. That's the type of thing I'd do. Sometimes, I'd be gone for almost a week and she would do everything here.

Carol: Did you do any farming there at your house?

Nancy: No. We ended up putting in evergreen trees on part of it.

Bob: All kinds of trees.

Nancy: I don't think that at 3.7 acres anybody farmed that. I mean, we had a vegetable garden.

Carol: Right.

Nancy: There is a part of the Brandywine, one of the streamlets goes through it, so we have a pond.

Bob: We had the pond dredged out. It was 8.5 ft deep on one end.

Nancy: We had a diving board and would swim in the pond. Until the snake. That's another story.

But, just in case you wanted it, there was a time when East Brandywine sold these cards.

Carol: I think my mother drew some of these.

Nancy: You think that she illustrated them? There's a description of East Brandywine Church.

Allie: Would it say her name on the back?

Carol: No, it doesn't. It mentions the first schoolhouse. I know my mother did some notecards. This doesn't look like her work. She was more freeform, and this is more accurate.

Nancy: It's not signed. My parents used to jump all over me because I didn't sign my artwork.

Carol: So, did you do that?

Nancy: No, I didn't illustrate that. I have recently illustrated for another person, but that's not me.

Allie: You're an artist.

Nancy: No.

Allie: You won't call yourself an artist, but you're probably an artist.

Laughter

Carol: You see that look? She's not giving herself credit!

Nancy: I like to draw. For his ninetieth birthday party, I drew a picture of him feeding dogs biscuits.

That was the invitation to the party. I also used to illustrate my parents' Christmas cards. I just didn't put a signature on it.

Allie: Now, is this yours to keep?

Nancy: I have two others.

Allie: Oh, perfect, thank you. We'll put it in our archives.

Nancy: There was a second side to the home ownership paper, but it cut off.

Bob: That was mostly things that happened with the house.

Allie: Recent history.

Carol: I saw that the land was owned by Batten. I remember Hopewell Church was once called Batten Meetinghouse. Does that sound right?

Nancy: There's a road called Batten Drive, you know.

Bob: That whole corner of that property was given to Hopewell Church. It was suggested that they use the sale of the subdivision to put the addition on Hopewell Church.

Carol: Oh!

Bob: That's where a lot of the funds came from for the last addition. Before all that came in along that area, we'd take our kids out. There was a fad of buying rockets.

Allie: Rockets?

Bob: Yeah, you could buy a little rocket. Some were bigger. They had a place where you could put a little heating element on the bottom and you'd use a battery. You had the explosive wick coming out of the bottom.

Nancy: You could shoot the rocket up.

Bob: If the wick was long enough, you could light it. That whole area where the development is now was all cornfields. We'd wait until they cut it down and you'd bring the rockets up to where the parsonage is now—to that area—and it was at the end of our property. We'd go launch rockets.