

Oral History with Jim Laessle
331 Bridgeboro Rd., Moorestown, N.J.
August 4, 2008

M: Mr. Laessle, could you tell me when you were born?

L: 1920 in Moorestown. That would make me a life long resident of Moorestown.

M: Where were you born in Moorestown?

L: At home.

M: And where was your home located?

L: On the North side of East Second Street between Pancoast and Stanwick. When the trains went through Moorestown, I was in the back bedroom with the windows often open to get fresh air. The smoke would blow in one ear and out the other and I've been a train nut since.

M: And were both of your parents born in Moorestown?

L: They were.

M: Okay, and where was your father born?

L: 265 East Main Street.

M: And how about your mother?

L: What is now Park Drive and Stanwick Avenue on the Roberts' farm there.

M: What was your father's full name?

L: Charles Laessle, Jr.

M: And how about your mother?

L: Alice May Roberts

M: When you were younger did you go to elementary school in Moorestown?

L: My first schooling was in kindergarten in Detroit, Michigan for a brief time. We never moved away from Moorestown. My father had a construction project in Detroit. We had to move there for a short time so while I was there I went to kindergarten. We came back to Moorestown and I went to Stanwick School on Zelly Avenue from first grade through fourth grade.

M: Can you describe the school at that time?

L: A boxy, brick, two storied building, old even then. First and second grade were in one room on the first floor; a stairway went half way up to the second floor. Halfway up there's a, what do you call it, a genderless washroom. Then you went the rest of the way up and the third and fourth grades were on the second floor. There was a fire escape towards Linden Street which I remember because every once in awhile we had to dust the erasers out on that fire escape. My first grade teacher was Miss Sherwood. She

was also my second grade teacher. And the principal was Miss Beebe who was also my third and fourth grade teacher.

M: Do you know how many children were in the school approximately at that time?

L: The whole school?

M: Yes

L: Between thirty and forty.

M: And how did the children generally get to school? Did they, did they...

L: They all walked. There wasn't any such thing as school providing transportation. Rarely did our parents drive because at that era 1925, 1926, families were just one car families. And as I said before, my father used to commute to work on the train.

M: Now you lived at Second and Stanwick. Is that correct?

L: Yes

M: Okay. And how did you actually... from Second and Stanwick you walked to school. Can you describe your trip to school in the morning on an average day?

L: On an average day? I waited for a couple of classmates to come from down Stanwick Avenue or Second Street to our house, and then I would join them. I forget whether it's three or four or how many. As a group we would go down Second Street to Zelly Avenue: picking up at least one or two more between Stanwick and Zelly, and then going on Zelly Avenue to the railroad and across the railroad to school.

M: Okay, umm.. did trains regularly come through there where you passed over these railroad tracks?

L: At 1926 there were about, according to the old time table, about 14 trains in the morning and 14 trains in the afternoon, plus a couple of freights.

M: Was there anyone there to assist the children while they were walking to school when they were going over this train area?

L: The board of education hired a handicapped man, a peg-legged man actually, that we called Old Jim. He had his dog there and he had a little tiny itty bitty shelter for the weather. And his job was solely to make sure we didn't cross the tracks when the train was coming. And he also chatted with us.

M: What was his name?

L: Old Jim.

M: Do you know how long he was there... do you remember him being there for any certain amount of years?

L: As long as I went to school there.

M: Did you ever know where he lived?

L: I haven't the slightest idea. I don't know how he got there and got back again either.

M: He's sort of a mystery.

M: You had mentioned in a previous conversation with me that there used to be a community called Stanwick Mills. Could you tell me something about Stanwick Mills, and how it originated, and what might have led to its demise?

L: Okay, well let's start over. Stanwick originally appeared on New Jersey road maps as a dot. It was identified as a little community but it was part of Moorestown as far as I can remember. It was historically always a part of Moorestown but...

M: A separate little community inside...

L: It was like a factory town now, you said mill. The mill there was not the mill that grinds corn. It was a knitting mill built there. I understand, but I can't find it documented, that on one of the trains there was a man by the name of Rogers, who looked at that spot and got an idea that this would be a good spot to build this mill. And anyhow the mill was built. Then also on the other side of Stanwick Avenue, the east side, there was another factory built that later became J.S. Rogers Co. They were big builders, commercial builders. The mill as we called it a mill, I called it a carpet works, later became I think Terracotta Works, but somehow or other I can't keep in my mind which came first, the terracotta or the carpet. It was architectural terracotta, not flue lining or drain tiles, apparently successful but because of where they had to haul the clay from it shut down. Later it burned down.

The station, (referring to the train station), I have pictures showing two men with a high wheel bike. At the station, beside Stanwick, it had a sign saying "Post Office" and "Adams Express". Adams Express was a forerunner of Railway Express. Besides having a little sub postal station they shipped and received packages from the trains.

M: So they had a little post office just for the community called Stanwick Mill which existed inside of the town of Moorestown.

L: It wasn't called Stanwick Mill either.

M: Stanwick.

L: Stanwick.

M: Do you know how many people might have lived in that little particular area?

L: No, but the only evidence of it, is if you go down Stanwick Avenue, go uptown you'll see the workman's houses and the different types of houses and homes. There's a row of double houses which I would assume, and I was told, these were the workers that worked in one or the other of the two operations. Then you'll see a bigger house and that was the foreman on Linden Street. Then you go up to Pearl Street which is a little street there, there's a larger home. I understand that was the superintendent's house, in other words you saw the status from the boss to the foreman to the workman and so on down the road, from that whole community. So that community really was based on the variety of employees of that mill. Now somewhere I think there's still a document has the names...

M: Who was it?

L: (sneeze), now that wasn't planned. Who was I going to tell this little story about? Phil Flanders. Phil Flanders has looked up and found the names of a lot of these workers and what they did at the mill. I don't remember that but Phil can remember. He delved into history and found out that this was, that was what created this neighborhood there.

M: When there was the fire, was it the actual mill that had burned or were any of the homes destroyed?

L: No, no the homes weren't that close to the mill really then on either Pearl Street or Linden Street. The mill actually had a railroad siding that went down into it as everything did then.

M: And did that burn, actually the mill itself?

L: The whole roof and everything collapsed and that was torn down. I think when it burned the mill was not the mill and the works or whatever it was, it had shut down before it had burned.

M: Okay. Umm, now you had advised me when we had spoken before that you were born a Quaker in Moorestown and your mother had actually gone to Friends Academy. Where was that located at that time?

L: Friends Academy was located behind what is now Moorestown Post Office.

M: Okay. And you had also mentioned that there were two "Meetings" in Moorestown because of a rift. Can you provide any information that you have about that?

L: There was a separation of the Quakers in Moorestown and around here one group became the Hicksites and the other became the Orthodox. I am continually losing which was which, which came first the chicken or the egg, but the oldest meeting house which is still in active use today was the first one and then the West Meeting House was built, it was called the West Building at the Friends School next to Page Lane. It was built by the other half that split off.

M: In a previous conversation we did identify the Hicksites were in the Meeting House that exists today and the other group was in the West Meeting House. Is that correct?

L: Well, you'll see a sign called the West Building it was the West Meeting.

M: Do you know anything about what led to the rift or what was the..

L: No, I wasn't born yet when that happened.

M: Okay. And how about the makeup of the people that were the Hicksites vs. the type of people that were ...

L: Hearsay is that the ones in the East Meeting House were basically agriculturally inclined, farmers and so on, and in the West Meeting House were basically business people.

M: Okay.

(Pause)

L: We're still working we're just not talking right now. Yaddy yaddy yaddy... (laughter)
We're wasting good air time.

M: Okay now you had told me your father when you were growing up, had taken the train to Philadelphia at Stanwick Station. Is that correct?

L: He had to go to school to Drexel. At Drexel.

M: And did your mother go to Drexel also?

L: Historically my father was born on East Main Street and for one reason or another he went to the high school, public school. My mother was born the youngest of six kids and she was sent to the Friends School. Why she was sent to the Friends School, don't know. But anyhow, because of that they never met each other. My mother having five brothers and didn't know how to boil water; her parents sent her to Drexel to learn how to boil water and do other things. So they both commuted on up the train from Moorestown to Philadelphia and that's where they met.

M: And um, you had mentioned that there was a man named Percy Lovell....

L: Lovell (pronounced Level)

M: ...who had lived in Moorestown and took the train. Can you tell us some stories about...

L: Percy Lovell was the editor of the Moorestown Chronicle and there's whole books of stories about Percy Lovell. My recollection of Percy is that he and Myra, who we called the little one, lived across the street from us on Stanwick Avenue on Second Street.

M: What was Myra's name, full name?

L: I don't know. Phil Flanders has it. He has a whole history but anyhow, Percy and Myra lived across the street on Second Street. And Percy was the editor of the Moorestown Chronicle and he took the train from Stanwick Avenue to Chester Avenue. The Pennsylvania Railroad said that he had the shortest commutation ticket that they ever issued, for Percy to ride back and forth between his home and office. They were good neighbors and I enjoyed Percy because he was very entertaining because when he went to work, the little one as he called her, (he didn't call her Myra that I know of) would see him to the door and they would embrace and good bye and then as he walked down the walk he'd turn around two or three times on the walk and wave good bye and then he went down to Stanwick Avenue got a little further away and took a hanky and he'd wave. Now Phil Flanders said that when he got further down Stanwick, (and I don't remember seeing this) he would strike a match, but I'd never seen him strike a match, but anyhow that was his send off to go to work. I don't know what the return was because I guess I was at school or something when he came back.

M: I have some notes and it looks like Myra's name was Myra Stokes Lovell.

L: Probably

M: Okay. There was another person..

L: Was this guy, the carpet guy?

M: ..who used to take the train and he was on the corner of Second and Pancoast?

L: Yes.

M: Could you tell us a little bit about this person and do you know the name of him?

L: No, I don't.

M: Okay.

L: I understood he had a carpet and rug business in Camden. When I say rug business "Orientals" and so and so forth because his name reflected that part of the world where rugs often came from, or that type of rug came from. Anyhow, he would take the train to Camden but he'd walk down Stanwick. He walked

down Second Street from Pancoast to Stanwick and then he'd stop at the corner of Stanwick and Second, and if you looked down at that time, Second Street to see the train coming around the curb into Moorestown, with that he'd start walking slowly towards the train and he managed to get there, and the conductor knew this game. Just as the train was pulling out so with his little short legs he'd run like hell and jump on the last car as it went out of the station. He did this every morning. It was routine; it was a little game he played and the conductor laughed at him. I don't know if he ever missed the train but I didn't..

M: But he might have come close.

L: I didn't watch it that meticulously.

M: You also described another family. You described them as a self-sustaining family.

L: Oh, that's ...

M: in Moorestown. They were the Petit's?

L: The Petit's.

M: Could you tell us about the Petit's?

L: Well the Petit's lived down what was at one time called Featherbed Lane. Now it's a, the President of Commerce Bank renamed the lane to something like, but anyhow the Petit's lived down the lane had a farm and they were completely, lived completely independent of the niceties of that day. They had a cow for their milk and they had chicken for eggs and Mrs. Florence Petit (I remember her first name) was a very robust woman, short and robust, rotund. She also raised squabs for some of the restaurants in Philadelphia, but then in the springtime Florence would hook up the horse to what I call a produce wagon, which was a wagon with a top on it, but then in the back it was built to have beans and string beans and beets and all that kind of produce. And she would go up and down the street, people would look for her, to buy fresh farm produce including eggs and probably some chicken, and I don't know if she sold, I doubt she sold milk or anything like that, but mostly farm produce. She was a big woman and I was always amazed that when she got in the wagon, I thought the wagon might tip over because she looked like she'd been to McDonalds too often, but there wasn't any then, but she got in and waddled on her way down with her horse to the next person to buy produce.

M: You had mentioned that Florence Petit had raised squabs. Could you tell me what squabs are?

L: Squabs to me are a polite name for pigeons. On Feather Bed Lane there was a smaller building which was a pigeon loft, squab loft, call it what you may, and she would go there, and I witnessed it a couple times, but I'm not going to tell you the gory details of slaughtering the squabs, but the restaurants in Philadelphia would probably ask her for some squabs. Today we used to have a thing called Cornish hens which I always thought were undernourished chickens, (laughter) don't know if squabs are like that or not. Anyhow that stuff is gone and her farm house is closed down. They never got electricity and never got telephones. They came up to Main Street to borrow the phone from people who lived up there.

M: Now you had also talked about home made root beer that was made at that time. Could you tell us about that?

L: It was nonalcoholic first. In the neighborhood, the neighborhood consisted of Second Street to Zelly Avenue where Second Street starts and it went down as far as Pancoast to two or three houses beyond there and then there was nothing beyond there. So the neighborhood consisted of, I would call my fellow guys, my kids, my friends in that area, and among many things we did in the summertime, we made homemade root beer. During the winter we would collect quart soda bottles and in the summertime we'd

bottle the root beer. The root beer was made out of a Hire's root beer extract, thick liquid, a lot of sugar, yeast and water. We'd mix this all in a big pot and then we'd put it in the bottles and cap it and put them down the basement. You'd have to let the stuff, the solution in the bottles sit for a couple weeks before they carbonated. So apparently the rate of carbonation was not uniform because I can remember often up in our living room hear this boom down in the cellar, and it was one of the bottles that got carbonated too soon and it blew up. So hearing a couple of explosions in the rack of the root beer in the cellar was not unusual. I found out the other guys witnessed the same thing because we all talked about it. There was a lot of silly things we did then. I'm sorry kids miss it today.

We had go cart races at night which was a plank and we'd take the wheels off of our skates and put on this plank and a wooden box with tin cans for headlights and candles in it and a home made steering wheel made out of the bottom of a peach basket. In the dark we'd light the candles and race up and down the sidewalks; we had good sidewalks then, pushing each others push carts. We did a lot of things. There was a guy by the name of Pete Young who's always been a genius. He somewhere got a "crazy power professional" which is a wheel with a motor on it and it hooked to trike and it ran like hell. We were always up to something. We had more fun I think in those days, making model airplanes out of scraps of wood and so and so forth. We didn't have computers. We had model trains, that was another story, our tinsplate trains we'd call them, but we had more fun with just kite flying contests or fishing, and there was Art Voorhees and Armydis Hilton and Pete Young, and the Lippencotts, and the Armstrongs. Anyhow they were all part of a gang, not the same ones all the time, because some went away and some didn't. But we just had a lot of fun, good simple things including going down Stanwick Avenue to Zelly Farms and enjoying some of the fruits down there. We never got chased but hoped we would be.

M: You had told me before that the town had an ice man, a milk man and a knife sharpener. Can you tell us a little bit about the ice man?

L: Well, out of the three the most unique man was the Ice Man. He served flat ice which was in that era before mechanical refrigeration. His name was Fred Waldis and I can't remember your name but I can remember his. He had an enclosed wagon with an awning over the back with a step on the back and a horse that would come from east to west on Second Street and a lot of people had a little sign they'd put in their window that would say how much ice they wanted. In other words, five pounds, ten pounds, you'd put up how much ice you wanted, and Fred would chop up, I guess how much that ice was, and put on a burlap pad on his shoulder, and then put it in your ice box and rearrange the other ice in there. I guess he got paid once a week. But his horse was very smart because Fred would get the ice and walk back into our house, but in the mean time the horse would go up to the next stop and wait for him.

In the summertime this group I told you, these guys, found that when they chipped the ice to make the right size block there were all pieces in the back and they were a delightful treat. Of course they get these little stick, cheap pieces of ice, you don't worry about sanitation, and had it as a cooler. That was Fred Waldis.

The other man was also a neighbor, was Ferd Watson and he lived in the last house on north west side of Second Street just before Second and Zelly. Incidentally he had a daughter that may be still around that could probably supplement what I'm saying a lot and she worked for public works and what's her name? Anyhow, the thing about Ferd was that he delivered mail. Of course we didn't have any junk mail in that day it was all first class and we could tell when he was coming because he had very well trained, skilled whistling. He would be whistling all the time and he would waddle, he could waddle his whistles. The thing that we enjoyed about Ferd was, we had two mails then, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, a little brass letter slot on the front door. In the summertime if we saw Ferd come down the walkway when we were looking for him he'd be, "aw Jim" or to my mother "your sister-in-law" or to me "your Aunt Ruth is having a great time in Yellowstone" and he would read her postcard (laughter) and tell us about the message before he got to the door. It was a lot of little things like that used to take, of all the nerve ... Ferd was a good friend. He was just part of the neighborhood, part of our family. He never owned a car but he rode a bike from his home down to the post office to get the mail in a big leather

pouch and he'd park his bike and walk the route. We could count on him for getting our mail twice a day. He was a neat guy. His daughter's name was Mildred and I don't know whether she's alive today. She worked for public works but I know she's retired by now.

M: And how about the milk man?

L: Oh, well we didn't know the milk man like we knew Ferd because they're early in the morning, but our first milk, and everybody got fresh milk, daily, on your back, I guess the back steps. My first recollection was quart glass milk bottle and sometimes we'd order it we'd get cream in a smaller bottle, but he had a horse and wagon, the first one usually woke me up because the wagon would come down Stanwick and have steel on the wood wheels of this wagon with the horse and then we had a big improvement, they put like automobile tires on the wheels so it didn't make all that noise in the morning. But the thing that many people my age talk about in the cold weather how the milk would freeze and push the top up beyond the top of the bottle, but I never heard nothing more because he was come and gone long before I was awake.

M: And how about the knife sharpener? Do you remember anything about him?

L: That was a seasonal thing. We had several seasonal people. One of them I recall when the weather was decent because I wouldn't see them walking around in cold weather, and I'd know very little about him except that it was an event that a lot of the housewives looked forward to, was the man we called the knife sharpener. He had on his back and walked down the street ringing a bell singing "knife sharpener" and he had a little stand on his back with a stone on it and if you wanted your scissors or knives sharpened you'd come out front and hail him and he would sharpen whatever you wanted sharpened. He only came about once or twice a year as I remember. I don't know where he came from and where he went, but it was a tradition in the neighborhood.

The other tradition we had in the neighborhood in the spring... Stanwick Avenue was a single lane tar and chips road with big ditches on either side on the road; however, in the spring it was a beautiful place for dandelions. And these, I guess they were Italian people, came from some place on the trolley car or the bus, and collected these dandelions in big old paper bags for what we were told was dandelion wine. Every spring there'd be one or two or three come out and nobody minded them taking the dandelions because we didn't want them. They collected a couple bags of dandelion leaves to make wine from it.

And the other character we had was coal. Nearly everyone had to heat up coal. There were about four coal yards in Moorestown. The nearest one was Moorestown Supply Company which was right where Care One, where the new Alzheimer's facility is. So that was a coal yard, Moorestown Supply, and of course coal was cheaper, less expensive, off season, like in the spring than the winter. My father had a coal bin built big enough to hold the whole winter supply to get advantage of that lower price and then whenever he ordered it, after heating season was over, we started getting coal and at least three or four truckloads, it seemed like forever of coal. They'd back into the driveway and shovel it into the chute and come into the coal bin.

But that's normal, what was different we had a farm collie dog who loved coal trucks and most of them would run between Stanwick Avenue and Second Street and Main Street and my dog liked to chase those coal trucks, bark at 'em. The drivers were annoyed by this, so they said would you keep your dog in? Well we did as everyone did then, the dog was outside; whatever, so we gave them bags of black pepper to throw in the dog's faces to try to get them to stop from barking at the coal trucks. So a lot of little unique things you don't hear about today because nobody gets coal.

M: That's right. You also told me about the Johnson family who was the founders of the Victor Talking Machine.

L: Yes.

M: Where did they live?

L: They lived at what today is the Lutheran Home which was called the castle of the Lutheran Home, that big stone building. That was built by the Allen family first. Allen was S. L. Allen that made back yard farm equipment. In Moorestown then you had to realize a lot of the homes, particularly on Central Avenue, had big back yards where they raised all kinds of produce in the summertime. And the equipment that Allen made were hand pushed plows and cultivators and stuff like that, and then in the wintertime S. L. Allen made Flexible Flyer Sleds.

M: Made what?

L: Flexible Flyer Sleds. 'Cept for farm equipment the sleds were pretty seasonal. But anyhow it was a very successful business for awhile and they built their home then and really I don't know why the Allen's moved out and Johnson had moved in, and I think he didn't have the parking lot because the chauffeur lived next to my grandfather on Main Street and the house is still there. Another one of the staff lived on Main Street too, also. For all the big financial difference in status, my grandparents that lived on Main Street and the Johnsons were very friendly. How friendly were they? Well Johnson had a huge yacht called the Carolyn and my grandparents were often guests on it.

M: The Carolyn. So they were friendly neighbors.

L: (indiscernible)

M: You had talked a little bit about the Zelly Farm. Could you describe the Zelly Farm for us and I believe that that's where the airport was developed, in that area.

L: Well that's good because we need to correct that.

M: Okay.

L: The Zelly Farm as I knew it was the first farm beyond developed Moorestown at that time on Stanwick Road on the east side. It started at Linden Street and it went down to a little stream. Those condos they built off back there off of Stanwick Street, in fact there's a pond there now you may have seen it. It goes under Stanwick Road. That, I think, is the end of the Zelly Farm and then on the north side of the street was my grandfather's farm. So that ...

M: What was your grandfather's name?

L: Asa Roberts, my mother's father.

Now the Zelly Farm was a farm, I never knew anything about the Zelly Family, but what I did know was that it was a very productive fruit farm because they grew peaches and they grew grapes, not at the same time because there were grapes for one time and then a year later there were peaches on the farm. Well this same group I talked about, the neighborhood guys, maybe not the whole neighborhood but two or three guys would go out there and enjoy a couple of peaches or some grapes; they were the kind of grapes you'd squeeze the inside out of the shell and spit out the inside and suck the juice out of it. (laughter) We understood that all of our peaches were shipped to fancy food stores up in New York because we would never saw them on the market around here. They're huge, they were like grapefruit and I don't know what else, other fruits grew, except I do remember the peaches and grapes. Well we got scolded about grape juice on our shirts and so on.

M: Umm, you had also..

L: Now the airport..

M: Okay

L: ..that took.. Asa Roberts' farm went from Stanwick Avenue we call it north, no east, all the way over to, we called it Airport Road, that's not the name of it at all, it's Westfield Road. It became Airport Road because of the airport. One of the Roberts families, related to my grandfather, took a piece of that farm on Westfield Road side, and created Moorestown Airport with a group of other men who wanted to fly and wanted an airport. That's where I said I rode my bike out there. I can remember the day that two or three planes came around and of course seeing an airplane then, in the twenties, was "yoh there's an airplane". We don't pay attention to it now. But they went over and landed and that was the start of the airport. They built a couple hangars and it grew and grew and grew til finally they couldn't grow anymore because the township wouldn't let them expand. If they expand they wouldn't .. the airport didn't want to expand the field they wanted to expand the hangars to store the planes in. The township wouldn't give them a permit to do that so it shut down.

M: You had told me a story about a trip that you took out to the airport on your bike and you had bummed a ride.

L: Well what happened that was a common event for one of us or two of us or three of us to ride our bikes. There was a little shack, building, something like that, little coffee bar or something, but we'd ride out there and just watch the airplanes because they're fascinating. But one day I was out there by myself. There was a fence to keep the spectators from going on the field and I was ogling the planes and one of the pilots came over and said "how do you like these airplanes?" (L responded), "oh I love them" (the pilot then said), "would you like to go for a ride?" I'm just making up this conversation but apparently it went that way and finally he said "what do you have in your pocket; have any money?" I dug out my money and it was 35 cents which was a lot of money then. He said you wanna go for a ride, give me the money and hop in.

(gap in tape)...a ride with him in an old biplane with seats up front big enough for two and one time there must have been two of us that took the plane, two of us sitting on the plane, another time went up with him, I forget what he charged, 'bout the same thing, and I took my box camera a picture of our house (laughter) and things leaning over; you have no idea what this kind of plane is. It's a twin plane, twin wing plane, big noisy engine up front, and then I had big cockpit up front with a horse hair seat or some kind of seat, leather or something, and then in the back a smaller one for the pilot. The front one just had a windshield and you were sitting in the open and that was for passengers, and you were partly under the wing, but anyhow, it was exciting times back then.

From that, the staff at the airport created a club called the Moorestown Airplane Club or something, and we met at the community house and we built our model planes and we had to get degrees of achievement by doing homemade airplanes and flying up to the rafters in the community house and land again and do stuff like that. But that was more fun when you're building these little airplanes.

M: Mr. Laessle I would like to sincerely thank you for your time, your stories, and the contribution you've made to the Moorestown Historical Society.