



Interview with Helen Thompson

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Name of Interviewer: Joanna Aiken

Premises of Interview: Mrs. Thompson's home, Freehold, NJ

Birthdate of Subject: September 22, 1917

Ms. Aiken: Thank you so much for letting us interview you, Mrs. Thompson. What are your most prominent memories of Monmouth County?

Mrs. Thompson: As a child, I remember all of the beautiful farm land that we had here. My father died when he was only forty-two, and my mother, of course, had to survive with three children, so we did farm work every summer. When school let out, we went to the farm. My brothers and I would ride on the back of the flatbed truck that took us from the house to the farm, and I remember how beautiful all of the farms looked. The farmer would come to the neighborhood. We'd hop on the truck and we'd go and pick potatoes, raspberries, strawberries, tomatoes, whatever he had to pick, and we earned enough money so that my mother was able to survive for the rest of the year. The widows didn't have the benefits that they have today, but we survived.

And that was it. I enjoyed it. I really and truly enjoyed it. My two brothers and I, and many other children in the neighborhood, did just that, and that is how we spent our summer vacations. And then, of course, later on when we went to high school, we always worked at other places like Newberry's or an ice cream parlor. For three summers, I babysat for Dr. Berger's children. He was from New York, but the family used to come here to their summer home in Bergerville. And then, lots of times, I'd go to New York with them, and spend an extended weekend with them if it was a holiday or something. It was so fascinating. They had an enormous impact on my life. It was like I was a big sister, and I will never forget the summers I spent with them. Very nice.



**Helen Tela
(Thompson) 1936**

Ms. Aiken: Was there a Newberry's in Freehold?

Mrs. Thompson: Yes. Sure, there was a Newberrys right on West Main Street. The store was where CVS is now.

Ms. Aiken: What is Newberry's?

Mrs. Thompson: Newberry's was a five and ten cent store. That was all before your time. Woolworth's and Newberry's were called five and ten cent stores.

Ms. Aiken: Oh, like a little drug store.

Mrs. Thompson: Well, you didn't get too many things for five or ten cents, but that is what they were called.

Ms. Aiken: What was the famous chain that just closed in New York?

Mrs. Thompson: Woolworth's. Woolworth's and Newberry's were all the same category.

Ms. Aiken: So, you grew up in the Peach Orchard, right?

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, yes.

Ms. Aiken: Can you tell me what exactly what that is?

Mrs. Thompson: I don't know where they get the name from, but evidently they must have had peach orchards in that section of Freehold. They had apple orchards at Club Place in Freehold, but they didn't call it "Apple Orchard." Nobody seems to know why Texas is called Texas. Mr. Ira Tilton, who was our local historian, tried to find out why that area is called Peach Orchard, but to no avail. And West End is another section. If you lived on Bannard Street in Freehold, or any of the streets in that section, you lived in West End. So, that's it. And if you lived between Haley Street and Rhea Street, you lived in Peach Orchard. We had a very diversified group of people lived there. Mostly Irish and Lithuanian; my people were Lithuanian, and then we had the Negroes. It was a beautifully blended neighborhood. And if it wasn't for our next door neighbor, a Negro family, I don't think we would have survived. They were a fine family. The lady's name was Lavinia Jackson. Living with her were her brothers, one who worked in the Post Office, and one who worked as a glasscutter for Freehold Glass Company. Another brother, Gus, used to be sort of a messenger for Rexall Drug Store, which was on the corner of Main and Throckmorton Street, right by the Episcopal Church. "Especially For You," the florist, is there now. There were five of them all together, and they were all single. Anyway, when my dad died, my mother became a widow at thirty-eight with a history of rheumatic heart, which meant frequent trips to the Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch.

Lavinia Jackson would bring in a chunk of meat that she had roasted, or a pie or a cake, or a kettle of soup, and this was all the time. Among the other "colored" were the Gatlin family. They were very nice people, very nice. The Gatlins later moved to Randolph Street right near the Catholic Church. And we had the Valentine family, the Lewis family, and the Robinson family. And then, of course, we had all the Lithuanians. We had the Gallenouskis, the Sirutis, the Marks, the Bushmans, the Westpenders, the Valencius, the Yoczis, the Globis, and the Shatkus families. These are Lithuanian people in that area.

Ms. Aiken: Is there still a Lithuanian community there?

Mrs. Thompson: No, no. It's mostly now colored, and maybe Hispanic, too. I'm not too sure now. But there are many new houses there and three churches on the street. My house burned down after my mother sold it. We sold the house to Allan and Julia Sparks.

Ms. Aiken: How did you happen to get here from Lithuania?

Mrs. Thompson: I didn't come here from Lithuania. I was born here in Freehold. But my mother and father were from Lithuania. They lived in the low income housing. When I was just a baby, my mother lost a daughter. There used to be a little bridge there, and Gilbert Colmbs used to have a lumber and coal place where you could buy. I don't remember this myself, but I just visualize what my mother told me. They used to grade potatoes there along the railroad siding. Certain potatoes were too small, and if they fell through the grates, then the children could take those potatoes because that meant they were rejects. Today we call them "gourmet" potatoes. And everyone in the neighborhood used to go there and get their share of potatoes. There was a freakish accident on the rails and that was how my sister was killed. I don't remember because I was a newborn at the time.

Ms. Aiken: How old was she?

Ms. Thompson: Going on six, just six. A very, very brilliant girl for her age. Very mature, my mother said. She'd walk down the street, and a neighbor would say, "Well, Isabel, how are things at the house?" And she'd say, "Well, you'd have to ask my mother and dad, I don't know." She wouldn't tell them, and she would bring home a large coal piece. My mother would say, "Isabel, why did you bring that? You got your dress all dirty." She'd say, "Well, Mom, it was so cold last year, we could use more coal." Now, my dad was alive at that time, and he worked for the County Road Department. I'm told my mother had a rough time when she lost her daughter, and understandably so.

Ms. Aiken: We were just talking about the different communities in Peach Orchard. You said there was an Irish community as well.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, the Irish. We had the Dugans, the Daleys, the Kelleys, the Van Schoiks, and the Martins. Mrs. Norkus was Irish and her husband was Lithuanian. Margaret Malloy was the housekeeper for the Brakely Beanery. The Daley family lived next to the Court Street School. She, too, was a widow who raised a fine family.

Ms. Aiken: You used to speak Lithuanian?

Mrs. Thompson: Yes. I struggle with it now, because I don't have anyone to speak it with. I have a friend, Helen Mica, who speaks it fluently. I can grasp it, but it is a little hard to communicate, but I try. I used to read and write it. I used to write my mother's letters to people in Europe. They must have understood them because they wrote back. (Laughter) When someone died, in the Lithuanian culture, the body would always be viewed at home. And I remember going with my mother to these various viewings, and my mother had a hymnbook. I still have the hymnbook; it is all in Lithuanian. They used to sing and sing, and I got to the point where I knew all those hymns pretty well. It would be late sometimes. I would be sleepy. They'd put the children off to take a nap and the mothers and fathers would continue singing until about midnight. That was the way they revered and paid respect to the deceased. Lithuanians are very strong Catholics. Of the three Baltic states, and I've heard this before on TV, too, Lithuania was the strongest Catholic nation. My mother used to say that when they were young, they would start out for church on Sundays in the morning, and would be all day getting to church, and they'd go barefoot so that their shoes wouldn't be all dirtied from the road. But they did this to appear neat in church.

Ms. Aiken: How did your parents happen to come to America?

Mrs. Thompson: How did they come? Well, I asked my mother that several times. I said, "Mom, how could you have left your mother?" And she wasn't even eighteen when she came. I think she fudged her age a little bit. And, she said, "Well, my mother said 'go,' because my mother's father came to America in the hopes that he would get a job and be able to support his family and then bring his family over." At that time, I guess, they were allowed to come over without any kind of a problem. My grandfather worked himself into a nice position in the coalmines in Pennsylvania. Now, this is the story that I am told. He was promoted to a foreman position of a team. And there must have been jealousy or envy or something and next thing you know, they say he was accidentally killed, but my mother always said he was probably not killed accidentally. They probably killed him. And they identified him and they traced it down to my grandmother in Europe. And so, that plan fell through, and he couldn't bring his family to America. So my grandmother said there is nothing left



**Helen Tela
Thompson's
mother, 1936**

for you children to live here for. So, they all left. One daughter left for South America. I understand she went back to Europe in later years. My mother was one of five girls and one boy. Some of them settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I have first cousins in Grand Rapids. Her brother, my Uncle Joe, never married, so there were no children there. But Aunt Anna had three children. And they have quite a lot of offspring. It's a large family. So, we communicate and visit more recently. I asked this one cousin in Europe if she would like to come to America, and she said she had had an only child who died of leukemia and she buried him in Lithuania. And she said I would never leave him. So that was it. But I have other cousins who wanted to come here also. I started the process, and then in the meantime, Canada opened its doors to all the displaced persons. During the war time most of them lost everything. And they just had to leave, hiding in barns and haystacks and everything to avoid the Nazis. They finally came to Canada. My mother and I visited them. They all live in very attractive homes and have attained success in their positions. They have done very well.

Ms. Aiken: Good.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes. So, they contributed something to Canada. And that was it. I don't know too much about my father's background. I do remember a beautiful picture of his brother who was an officer in the European Army; he was a handsome man. My father had a sister who came here. She came to Camden, New Jersey. She had a large family, too. I think she had five or six children. They are my first cousins. One of them now is married with seven children. And he never spent five cents on their education but they are all educated. One is a nurse practitioner, another one is an electrical engineer, a nuclear engineer. And another one is a banker. Another one is in the financial market in New York. They are all doing beautifully.

Ms. Aiken: When you and the other children weren't picking the raspberries and the potatoes, how did you play? What kinds of games did you play?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, we played marbles. We'd shoot marbles of all descriptions. We played hide and seek, hop scotch, and jump rope. We liked to play baseball and football.



St. Rose of Lima (building no longer exists) around 1931

Ms. Aiken: Girls?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, sure, we played baseball. We played hide and seek and marbles. Oh, marbles were a big thing. We all had big jars of marbles. I wish I had them now.

Ms. Aiken: What was your favorite game to play?

Mrs. Thompson: I don't know. I liked them all. I grew up with two brothers, so I got kicked and hurt. We lived on a farm one time, and I that is how I got a perforated eardrum. My husband used to laugh all the time and say, "Now I know what's wrong with you. Horse kicked you."

Ms. Aiken: Really?

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, he did. I didn't realize it. I was pulling on his tail thinking I could jump up on his back. (Laughter) But, he kicked me, I mean really kicked me. I mean I was unconscious for a long time, out on the field.

Ms. Aiken: It must have been terrifying for your mother.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, yes, but it all worked out all right.

Ms. Aiken: Did you go to the shore when you were growing up?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, once in a while, when my dad first learned to drive a car. He died in 1928. He took pride in the fact that he could drive a car. And he took us crabbing down in Keansburg. He knew some friends down there. And every once in a while we'd go on the beach. And, of course, years later, we all liked going down to the shore. But not anymore; I don't care for the shore, now.



George Tela
(Helen's brother),
circa 1936

Ms. Aiken: Do you remember going around in a horse carriage before you had the car?

Mrs. Thompson: When we lived in Tennent, my older brother, George, became very ill with scarlet fever, and my mother called for Dr. Applegate in Englishtown. She also called for Monsignor Kivelitz, formerly the Pastor of the Rose of Lima Church in Freehold. And who do you think was the first to respond? Monsignor Kivelitz in his horse and buggy.

Ms. Aiken: Oh, dear!

Ms. Thompson: Oh, yes. Well, my home in Tennent also burned to the ground. This is the way I understand how it happened: the ceilings were low, and the pipe to the stove was very close to the ceiling, and it became too hot, I guess, and caused a fire. My father had the good sense and the wisdom to throw all of the bedding out the windows. Pillows, blankets, everything he could possibly throw out, and then he lowered the three children on top of the blankets, followed by my mother and himself. And not a one of us had a scratch or a broken bone or anything. All five of us escaped. And I still remember sitting across the roadway and watching the house burn down to the ground. Sad.

Ms. Aiken: You were sad?

Mrs. Thompson: Of course. Then we had nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing left. A woman in Tennent, who lived on Tennent Road, a Mrs. Boguess took us in and got us started and then we moved here to Freehold. She was related to the Daliks in Freehold. In due time, my parents purchased a house on Avenue A in Freehold--house number seventeen. Ironically, this home also burned down after my mother sold it to Julia and Allan Sparks.

Ms. Aiken: Is there a house there now?

Mrs. Thompson: Presently, there is a Habitat for Humanity house on the site, and it will be occupied by Guggie Lewis' niece. There are now two Habitat for Humanity houses on the street, and three churches.

Ms. Aiken: What do you remember about the Karagheusian Rug Mill in Freehold?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, I remember that very well. When I finished school, there was no place you could work unless you went to work in an office where you earned about five dollars a week at the most. I know a friend of mine who worked for Dr. Bill Erickson. I think she earned seven dollars a week, and she even had to supply her own uniform. So, I went to work in the Rug Mill, which many of the girls from high school did, because we made five dollars a day, or more sometimes. It was piecework, winding yarn. You worked hard. I remember one woman saying to me, "Why are you working so hard? You are just a young kid. You don't need to work so hard." I said, "My mother is a widow, she needs the money."

Ms. Aiken: So, did you give all the money to your mother?

Mrs. Thompson: Sure. Always did. I gave all my money to my mother. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to shop, because at that point, I was still working weekends for the Bergers when they'd come here to Bergerville for an extended weekend. If time permitted, I would stay in New York City with them for a day or two. My mother gave me one hundred dollars one day. She said, "Now when you go to New York and you are going to stay there an extra day, I want you to go shopping and buy yourself a nice coat and a few other things to go with it." I shopped around. I couldn't find the coat or anything. I didn't know how to shop. I came home and gave my mother the money back. (Laughter) That's the truth. I'll never forget. Clothes didn't mean that much to me.

Ms. Aiken: How did you meet your husband?

Mrs. Thompson: He was a friend of my brother, George, who also worked in the Rug Mill. Walter was a weaver on a sixteen quarter loom, and they wove for Radio City, the airlines, and many prominent hotels. You just didn't walk off the street and operate one of those looms--no way. No, it was very complicated. That was what really caused his untimely death, too. When he became ill, the doctor kept saying he had water on the lungs. And so he had diets and all that sort of thing. I was a label reader. He was sick a couple of years before he died. But before he died, I finally found another pulmonary man, and I said, "Let's try this one. There is something wrong. This can't be just water. You're sticking to your diet, you've taken the medicine, and you still have the condition." So the doctor gave my husband some tests. He said to Walter, "What was your primary job when you were younger?" Walter said, "Well, I worked at the parimutuals at the racetrack and I worked at Fort Monmouth." The doctor asked, "But what did you work at mainly?" My husband said, "I was a rug carpet weaver." "Oh," the doctor said, "now I know what the problem is. That's lint. That's not water."



Helen Tela Thompson and future husband, Walter Thompson, 1938. They were married June 29, 1940.

Ms. Aiken: Fibers?

Mrs. Thompson: It was lint. Now you see when these men worked the four to twelve shift, they worked from eight in the morning until four, and then from four to twelve. By law, they had to have half an hour recreation period. And so with that, what did they do? They'd go outside and have a smoke. The smoking brought this problem along a little quicker. But the main culprit was the rugs, his job. Today, they would have things that would prevent things like this. But, I know on a sunny day if you looked over where the looms were working, you could almost cut a knife through the haze that had formed.

Ms. Aiken: I can well imagine that.

Mrs. Thompson: And many weavers died of the same thing-- lint in their lungs. Yes, some were using oxygen tanks before they died.

Ms. Aiken: You both eventually worked at Fort Monmouth?

Mrs. Thompson: After the Rug Mill moved to North Carolina, my husband was out of work, of course. And after putting thirty years in the rug mill, there was no severance pay, nothing, absolutely nothing. But he was able to get a job at Fort Monmouth. At that time, I was working at Fort Monmouth, also, and he worked at the Parimutuals at Freehold Raceway. He became a section manager of the

Parimutuals. They were in different sections, and his section was adjacent to my office.

Ms. Aiken: How was the commute from Freehold all the way over to Fort Monmouth everyday?

Mrs. Thompson: Colts Neck Road, or Route 537, was still a very beautiful road to travel. There were still open fields and beautiful pastures, as opposed to the mass building of the mansions today. I always enjoyed my trip to and from Fort Monmouth; Route 537 was one of the nicest highways to travel.

Ms. Aiken: How did you get there?

Mrs. Thompson: By car, and sometimes car pools. It wasn't bad. It wasn't heavy traffic like we have today. We didn't have that kind of traffic. I mean you had to be careful. One year, I remember we could not travel any speed because for the entire month of February, the roads were completely covered with snow and ice. At one time, I took my eyes off the road for a minute, and my gosh, there was a car in front of me that was facing me. The driver had made a complete turn around due to the icy road conditions.

Ms. Aiken: Wow! Oh my goodness.

Mrs. Thompson: But I never had an accident.

Ms. Aiken: Do you feel winters were colder?

Mrs. Thompson: Somewhat. I think they were. One year, as I said, for the entire month of February there was ice on the road and there was no way they could get that ice off.

Ms. Aiken: What do you remember about the Raceway Track?

Mrs. Thompson: I worked in the office there for five years. Because I had already had the children at that time, I couldn't keep a full-time job. We would only work from about May to September in the office. And, I liked that. I did secretarial work and also trained at Western Union in Asbury Park to learn how to operate the telegraph machine to report to various newspapers the racing results.

Ms. Aiken: Were you here at the Freehold track?

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, Freehold Raceway.

Ms. Aiken: Did you see a lot of famous people?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh yes, we had a lot of famous people, primarily on special days. I remember Rudy Valley coming one day. I'm upstairs in the office looking down at Rudy Valley, and Rudy Valley was making sure his toupee was on. (Laughter) Yes, we had a lot of celebrities there. They used to have celebrities there to attract customers on weekends especially.

Ms. Aiken: Tell us about Larry and Raymond.

Mrs. Thompson: Both of my sons brought me great pleasure. When growing up, Miss Ivins taught Larry piano-- Raymond had Mr. Starsnick. Raymond performed with local theater groups, too. Ms. Ivan lived on the corner of Yard and Main Street. Nolan Higgins and family live there now. I remember going to concerts that Larry would be taking part in. And, Ms. Ivans used to say, "Larry knows his music very well. But, his timing is so bad. Get him a metronome." So, I purchased a metronome. It didn't help much. And then Raymond, he was one of these little fellows that if there was a picnic in anybody's neighborhood, they wanted Raymond there-- he was a real "clown" and thrived on people's laughter. I used to take both boys to Armed Forces Day. They had Earle Ammunition Day, too. I must backtrack a little bit. In the apartment, we had two ladies: Miss Amelia Waller and Mabel Williams. They lived here for thirteen years. They saw my boys grow up. They were both maiden ladies. Ms. Mabel Williams worked at the New York 5th Avenue Library. She was more than a librarian, and they had books dedicated to her. I found out later that she was once named the Most Outstanding Librarian in the United States. We went to her memorial service. And the woman she always lived with was Amelia Waller. Her brother was a professor at the Rutgers University, and Ms. Waller was a high school principal at Point Pleasant. She had Dr. William Erickson, our local dentist, as one of her pupils at one time. So anyway, they used to watch the children playing in the sandbox. And they'd always say to me, "Raymond is a leader, he is a leader, that little boy of yours." And Larry, he sort of sits back all the time. My husband built that sandbox, a huge sandbox. And we filled it up by having a dump truck full of sand come in the spring. But by the end of the summer, there was no sand left. And that's the truth.

Ms. Aiken: (Laughter)

Mrs. Thompson: That's the truth. The big sandbox had a big platform and they used to ride their trains and their trucks and create situations. And all the kids in the neighborhood were here. I used to take Larry and Raymond on Armed Forces Day and to McGuire Airforce Base, Leonardo, and to Fort Monmouth just because I thought they should have all these things and know a little bit about what's going on in the area. I remember going on the ship in Leonardo, and the captain explained the ship and he explained the equipment. He told all the years that it was operating and all that business. And then he said, "Are there any questions?" And my little Raymond's hand went up. Incidentally, I forgot to tell you. Ms. Williams, the librarian, used to work as a volunteer for the Mobile

Library Unit, and at that time, it was located on the corner of Broad Street and Manalapan Avenue. And every week she would come with an arm-full of books for the children for me to read to them. And every week, she'd take them back and bring me a new group of books. So, those children knew Dr. Seuss, Babar the Elephant, and you just name them, and they knew them all. So anyway, when I took him to Leonardo this one time, the captain explained to us the dates of the ship's commission and all that business. And my little Raymond's hand went up and he said, "Now you said that this ship was commissioned on such and such a date. Well, this equipment was not invented until another day." The captain, with a kind of startled look on his face, said, "Well, you're right, son. We put that on later." Raymond asked the captain four good questions, but I was embarrassed at this point. And the captain said to him finally, "You know son, I think you know more about this boat than I do. I think you could take over."

Ms. Aiken: (Laughter) Do you know the name of the boat?

Mrs. Thompson: No, it was one of these boats that bring in cargo or whatever it was. It was at Earle. I will never forget that. We went to the Museum of Natural History in New York when Raymond was a cub scout. He'd spot the brontosaurus and the other dinosaurs. He knew all these things. You see, my two boys were so well read. And then when Raymond started school over at the Catholic school, the teacher called me aside the night when the parents were coming to hear the reports of their children, and she said, "Mrs. Thompson, what I'm going to tell you, I don't want you to repeat to anybody here because they'll think I'm prejudiced." And I said, "What happened?" She said, "Your Raymond is a genius." I said, "Genius? He brings me Cs and Ds. And that's not a genius report." "Ignore the report card. Forget about the report card. He has a brain the likes of which I have never seen," she said. "And I know he is listening to the trucks going by, but I say to him, 'Raymond what was that answer now?' and Raymond has it just like that," she says. "He has it. I have never been able to trap him, never." Unfortunately, he has another biological problem, so his life didn't turn out too good. He went into the service and became a Staff Sergeant in the Air Force and then after twelve years, he left the Service.

Ms. Aiken: Did you see a lot of changes after World War II?

Mrs. Thompson: I guess so. Things were really being speeded up. Of course, by that time, the Karagheusian Rug Mill was moving out of Freehold.

Ms. Aiken: Did you feel that Freehold or Monmouth County was successfully governed during all this speeding up with a lot of people coming to live here and all the changes?

Ms. Thompson: Well, it was gradual. The last ten years was when it has really happened. Oh my goodness, they were coming out of the woodwork. They were leaving the cities and coming here, and I don't blame them in a way. I am on the

welcoming committee for my church, which is Saint Rose of Lima. So, when a Sister or Father has a list of newly registered parishioners, I am to call and welcome them. And I ask them, "What made you come here to Freehold?" They said, "We love the town. We just love the town. It seems like such a friendly, nice town that you would want to be a part of." Yes, and really that's what they tell me. And at church too, they said people greet us like we're old neighbors and they like that. The friendliness, they say. I believe we can attribute the friendly part to the new pastor, Father Rich, who had introduced many ways for parishioners to be more friendly and supportive.

Ms. Aiken: Do you have any specific historical events that have like an impact on your life? Any specific ones like maybe FDR's New Deal Program or anything?

Mrs. Thompson: Well, I remember when the Hindenberg blew up in Lakehurst. I happened to be in Bukowsky's butcher shop on Throckmorton Street. I remember all this traffic on Throckmorton Street and the horns were blowing and the people were rushing out of their homes. I was only a young child. I found out later that the Hindenberg had collapsed and there were casualties. World War II changed my family structure with both of my brothers and my husband in Europe. George was a first class boatsman on the lead ship on D-Day. The ship was not expected to return to the United States, but all of the men survived the ordeal. My younger brother, Bill, was in the Engineer Corps, rebuilding damaged bridges. He remembered watching his comrades falling into the river like potato sacks. Thank God, he too was spared. My husband, Walter, was fighting in the trenches in Italy. He was wounded, and they were going to have to amputate his feet, but he was saved by penicillin. In fact, the doctor that treated him in Europe was his doctor from Freehold, Dr. McDonald.



Helen's brother, William Tela, Jr., who served under General George Patton

Ms. Aiken: How about the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby?

Mrs. Thompson: I remember that, yes, oh yes. That was sad. That was so sad. That beautiful picture of that little boy. And I still wonder if they ever got the right man.

Ms. Aiken: A lot of people do. What were you doing when you heard about Kennedy?

Mrs. Thompson: I was working for the Borough at the time, for my first engineer. I had five engineers during my nineteen-year stay at the Borough. And Mr. Goldberger was the engineer. Mr. Goldberger's plaque is on the hospital wall as well as at the Borough Municipal Building. He was the man who started the

planning phase for the hospital. He has since died. He was climbing up the stairs and he said, "We have some very bad news. Did you hear the news?" I said, "No, I haven't heard any news." "President Kennedy was shot." "Ooooh," I said, "Wow." And then, of course, I came home and heard it on the television. Later on we found out he died. That was so sad. He was so admired in spite of a lot of talk, you know, gossip. But he tried to do the best he could for his country.

Ms. Aiken: Yes.

Mrs. Thompson: You know, they talk about the Kennedys, saying they are womanizers and all that sort of thing. With all the wealth, they didn't have to work anywhere, they didn't have to do anything. But, they were civic-minded people and politically inclined

Ms. Aiken: Yes.

Mrs. Thompson: And now, of course, Caroline is the only one left. It was tragic what happened to her brother.

Ms. Aiken: Yes.

Mrs. Thompson: And there, again, the gossip columns are going crazy about him too. Ridiculous.

Ms. Aiken: It sells papers I guess.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, it's terrible.

Ms. Aiken: What were your favorite movies or books when you were younger?

Mrs. Thompson: Favorite movies? We had the Strand Theatre, and the Liberty Theatre. I enjoyed seeing comedies and movies with Barbara Stanwick or Clark Gable. I also enjoyed Laurel and Hardy, and Amos and Andy. Some of my favorite books were *Little Women* and any of the books in the Jalna Series.

Ms. Aiken: Was the Strand Theatre in Freehold?

Mrs. Thompson: Sure, sure. The Strand Theatre was located where the Court House Annex is now. There was a group of stores there, a bakery shop and I think the Firestone, and one of those stores that deals with automobile parts and things like that, and a little hardware. And the theatre was there. They always used to have the Saturday matinees and each week there would be a little segment of it, and then the next week, it'd be continued. I remember Barbara Stanwick in one movie, I don't remember the name of the movie, but I know that somehow or another she didn't reconcile herself with her daughter. I remember her looking from outside into the window, and she saw her daughter in the house.

She was dancing or having a party of some kind. I don't remember the movie, but it was starring Barbara Stanwick. And, then, of course, when I used to go to visit the Bergers, they had a live-in maid. One day the maid said to Mrs. Berger, "Can I take Helen to a movie?" And Mrs. Berger said, "All right, sure you can take her to a movie." And she took me to the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Ella Fitzgerald was on stage.

Ms. Aiken: Oh, you lucky thing!

Ms. Thompson: Yes, Ella Fitzgerald. And they had Jeannette Gaynor and Charles Farrell in *Seventh Heaven*, I'll never forget that. And when I came home, Mrs. Berger said, "It's kind of late. Where did you go?" We said, "We went up to Harlem." And she said, "You took her to Harlem?" She said, "Yes." I said, "It was nice, oh, I enjoyed it." In the old days, whenever there was a movie, there was a stage show as well. Ella Fitzgerald was in her prime and performed in great style.

Ms. Aiken: Wonderful, wonderful. I wish they still had that now.

Mrs. Thompson: Well, they have that in some of the casinos in Atlantic City. But they don't appeal to me. I like the shows, but that's it. And I'll spend the ten dollars that they give in the casino and after that I'll quit. When I worked at the racetrack, I was secretary to Charlie Davenport, the manager. Once, I said, "Mr. Davenport, is it ethical for me to bet? I'm here right in the office, and if I win, they'd think it was fixed or something." He said, "Wait a minute, did you even bet?" he asked. I said no. He replied, "Don't start. They are not meant to be beaten." (Laughter) I worked at the racetrack because my husband was working only three days a week for approximately six years before the mill finalized their plans to move to North Carolina.

Ms. Aiken: That's right.

Mrs. Thompson: So I never did bet. I don't even play the Lottery. I never put a dollar in the Lottery, no. I'm just not the gambling type. I have been very fortunate. God has been good to me in many ways. The reason why I got that job at Fort Monmouth is because when I left school, I had to work in a mill because times were tough in 1936. I had to make some money. I just couldn't work in an office for five dollars a week. So with that, wartime came, and my husband was going to be drafted. My neighbor was the late Mrs. Kelsey; her daughter's a nun, Sister Alice Kelsey. She is very much involved with the Correctional Institute. She has a degree in Theology, too. Anyway, Margaret Kelsey said to me, "Helen, there are some openings in Fort Monmouth, why don't you try and see if you can get a job there? Because if Walter is going away, you don't want to be working so hard and you'd do all right in an office. Things will be different." So, with that I said, "Okay, but gee, I'm out of school now for five years. I don't think I could make it." But anyway, I applied, and they accepted me. But of course, at that

time, if you had two hands and two feet they would take you in. You could just peck on a typewriter, because they needed people so badly. Anyway, they hired me. But there was a stipulation in order for me to keep that job: I had to pass a Permanent Civil Service Test. And, I said, "Uh huh. I've got to get some refresher courses here." So, I knew that my mother, being sick with a rheumatic heart, was living here with me at that time. My brothers were in the Service, and mother had sold her house to the Julia and Allan Sparks, so she came to live with me. And, I said to my neighbor, an art teacher named Florence Woolfender, "What am I going to do? I know a teacher, Mrs. Case, but," I said, "she lives in Farmingdale. I can't be traveling to Farmingdale and working at Fort Monmouth all day and leaving my mother here, I can't do that." She said, "There is a woman in Freehold who was a business teacher, and I think she will take you." And I said, "Who is she?" And she said, "Her name is Sally Lou Tilton." I said, "I don't know Sally Lou Tilton." So, with that, she said, "Well, I'll tell her I recommended you." So, I called up Mrs. Tilton and she said, "I don't want to take any more students. I have had a lot of students, and I get no satisfaction from them at all. I don't even know if they are successful or what, I'm finished--I'm through with them." I said, "Mrs. Tilton, I have a house to pay for. I have a sick mother on my hands, and my husband is going in the Service. I have a job, but I have to pass the test in order to keep that job. So, won't you please help me?" She replied, "Come on over Tuesday; I'll give you a try." And, every time I paid her, she had some reason to give me that money back. It was either a birthday or some reason. She and her husband had no children. He was an only child, and she was an only child. So with that, we became very friendly, and we have been friends now for close to fifty years. And we had a little dining club. Some friends got together and we all went out once a month to eat, celebrating birthdays. And just became very friendly. Some how or other our chemistry agreed with one another. I liked her very much, and I think she felt the same way about me. So, every time we have a little get together, they were always invited. Anyway, she taught me, and when I took my Civil Service exam, I got a nice high mark: ninety something. She was so happy she gave me all the money back that I had paid. I think she felt satisfaction from her efforts that she helped somebody achieve a goal. And so with that, she said, "You'll get along. You'll make out all right." So the next thing you know, I was working on a full-time basis at Fort Monmouth. I enjoyed the girls I worked with. They came from all over the country, though, so they never applied themselves too vigorously because they felt if and when their husbands would be transferred, out they would go, also. They weren't going to worry; they were just there buying time. But that was not the case with me. I had to apply myself vigorously so that I could get promoted, and I could keep on working, and so I did; and from a file clerk going to other jobs, secretary, in charge of the steno group, and then I had to give instructions on military correspondence, and things like that. Next thing you know, I became an Administrative Assistant to the Deputy Post Commander. His name was Colonel Holmes Paullin. That was my final position at Fort Monmouth because my husband and I made out an application to adopt a baby boy from Catholic Charities. Subsequently, we adopted a second baby boy.

Ms. Aiken: When you would go out to dinner with this dining group, what restaurants did you like to go to in the area?

Mrs. Thompson: Oh, we went to the very best restaurants: Shadow Brook, Old Mill Inn, and Molly Pitcher Inn. Mr. and Mrs. Tilton were used to the best. I served Mr. and Mrs. Tilton a number of times during a crisis upon their request. I was happy to be of some help. After the death of Mrs. Tilton, I graciously included Mr. Tilton with my work schedule at home. Upon his request, my husband and I were only too happy to oblige; he enjoyed his main meal at my home for fourteen years and there was always a happy camaraderie. He was such an intelligent man and full of local history. Mayor Wilson and Borough Council honored him on his last birthday, when he turned ninety-nine. In the council meeting room, a painting of him by Susan Winter hangs on the wall.

Ms. Aiken: What is the significance of the harness bells that you have in your house?

Mrs. Thompson: The sleigh bells in my dining room are one of the several items of interest that Mr. Tilton willingly and graciously brought to my home.

Ms. Aiken: In what way is your life now different from you thought it would be when you were young?

Mrs. Thompson: I always wanted to have a home on Morris Street-- that I achieved. I always enjoyed people and hoped my children would marry and live locally so I'd always have children around me, but that did not happen. Now, through the grace of God, I have found great pleasures and enjoyment in my friends' cousins' families and my neighbor's children, who live nearby. All in all, I'd say I'm quite content, and I feel that my strong faith has helped me to endure the hardships that have befallen me.

Ms. Aiken: What would you say has been your greatest achievement?

Mrs. Thompson: My greatest achievement? I would say through the help of God and prayerful guidance, I am no longer in the poverty level; I was fortunate to have married a good husband who connected to Catholicism and tried his best to be a good father to our two sons. I gave my very utmost in raising out two sons by providing a good environment, care, and bunches of love. Unfortunately, one can try their very best, yet every one is born with biological genes and that is something very difficult to control, I found. I thank God for His help--I have no regrets. I feel God has been so good to me because in the course of my work at Fort Monmouth, I met and dealt with knowledgeable people who enhanced my style of living. The friendships I made after the adoptions of my two sons have also enriched my life immensely. My older son, Lawrence, passed away this past Mother's Day, and is interred in Saint Rose of Lima Cemetery. He was married and lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. Through a search, he found a biological

sister who lived in Trenton and is employed by the New Jersey State Police Department. My younger son, Raymond, was married and divorced and has three children, all of which are adults now and are living in Cincinnati, Ohio. Through a search, he found that he has six biological siblings. The nearest one is a young lady who is presently studying for her degree in nursing, and works at St. Francis Hospital in Trenton as a nurse.

Ms. Aiken: What would you describe as your most important legacy to your family or friends or society?

Mrs. Thompson: I treasure my friends and enjoy happy camaraderie via visits and telephone conversations. I also have many charities, and remain active in my church-- only minimally now, though. Finally, I have a strong faith: "Love thy neighbor as thyself," and I try my utmost to live up to that commandment.

Ms. Aiken: I have enjoyed this interview so very much. Thank you for your time.

Mrs. Thompson: You're quite welcome.