



Interview with Helene Moore

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Ms. Higgins: Good afternoon, Helene, or I might as well come up front and call you Pete, because we've been friends for a long time. I'm very glad you're here today with us to be interviewed.

Ms. Moore: Thank you, Flora. I'm delighted to be here. I hope I can help you.

Ms. Higgins: You came down to Monmouth County when it was still very rural. Please tell us a little bit about what Middletown looked like, and maybe New Monmouth, which is where you settled.

Ms. Moore: When we arrived in New Monmouth in 1950, it consisted of a grocery store, a Baptist church, and a Catholic church. We bought a fifty-five acre farm from a Polish farmer and his family because we thought it would be a wonderful place to raise children. It was a garden or truck farming area and extremely rural. Our farm consisted of a peach orchard and an apple orchard, open fields and also a wooded area where the children occasionally liked to play. It was actually a delightful place to raise children.

Ms. Higgins: How long did the rural environment last?

Ms. Moore: Oh, approximately ten years. I'm not entirely sure; that's purely a guess. Developers started buying up land and building and they built all around us. We were pretty much surrounded by ranch houses and split-levels, and of course the whole nature of the scenery changed. Not for the best unfortunately.



Helene Moore, May 2000

Ms. Higgins: The schools must have taken a heavy impact with the population influx.

Ms. Moore: They really did. The schools had to enlarge, and I believe there was some new building. The whole character and personality of the place changed. I didn't particularly like it, but it certainly was better than living in the city, and we still had our land to enjoy for a period of time.

Ms. Higgins: Was your house old, as well?

Ms. Moore: Our house was quite old. It consisted of a very, very old portion and an addition that had been built sometime in the middle of the 19th century, which had rather high stately ceilings and large rooms. We remodeled it. We did most of our work in the old portion, which had the original wavy leaded windows. And the fireplace in the kitchen was large enough to hang huge pots and kettles in -- I'm sure they did all their cooking there. Unfortunately, it was crumbling and we finally had to demolish it for safety's sake.



The historic farmhouse at 23 Morford Road, as it looked before 1915. The photo was given to the Moore family by the late Wilbur and Agnes Roberts of New Monmouth.

Ms. Higgins: Was there any kind of culture clash between the sort of idyllic, rural fifty-five acres and then all the people coming into the split levels and the ranch houses?

Ms. Moore: Yes, because the new people coming in were a totally different type than the old timers who had been there when we first arrived. They brought with them the values of city life. They were very, very proprietary about their small lots, which we found very amusing. Many of them were very annoyed at us because we had animals -- horses, cows, goats, sheep, chickens, ducks and geese. Of course, horses and cows and other animals are not particularly cognizant of property lines. Occasionally we would have mishaps and some of the split level and ranch house dwellers were not very understanding about it. The horses and cows occasionally went loose. They had an unfortunate habit once in a while of breeding in plain view out in the fields. And of course, some of our lovely people from Newark and New York had led rather sheltered lives, shall we say, and they were very upset to have their children witness the realities of life. So we had a few problems with neighbors, I'll have to admit.

Ms. Higgins: You and your husband were active in politics. Was it a Republican or Democratic area? How did you find the scene when you came?

Ms. Moore: When we first arrived I would say it was 99% Republican. If there were any Democrats, we failed to unearth them. We were very liberal minded and very, very long time Democrats, both of us. And we found that a little bit

difficult; one had to guard one's social conversation. I even was a little leery when I first registered to vote because all the people at the registration table were long-time Republicans and solid citizens of the community, but I managed to screw up my courage and register as a Democrat.

Ms. Higgins: There were some powerful Democrats eventually. Did you work with Matt Gill?

Ms. Moore: Matt became a personal friend of ours. As a matter of fact, it was he who sold us our farm, and he used to drop in once in a while, and he would invite us to his place. We were never close friends but we saw him from time to time socially.

Ms. Higgins: He was Mr. Democrat in Middletown. When you got yourself into some kind of employment situation, where did you work?

Ms. Moore: When the children were small that was a problem. I wasn't exactly a born housewife, and I did want to go back to work as soon as I could. So obviously the most logical thing to do was teach, because then my hours would be the same as my children's. So I checked one day at the Board of Education -- I thought I might be hired as a substitute. They were in the throes of a teacher shortage, which I didn't know; I had just stumbled into the situation. When they discovered I had a degree, they asked if I would teach full time. It had never occurred to me to work full time and I discussed it with my husband. The upshot was that I accepted a job teaching first grade in the Navesink School, which was extremely small at the time. We had IQs from 60 to 180, and it was a very difficult class to teach because the range of intelligence was incredible.

Ms. Higgins: When you were teaching there, did you notice a lot of tension between the school board and the teachers?

Ms. Moore: No, I didn't. I don't think I was particularly interested in community affairs, and I suppose I was totally unaware of the situation with the Board of Education.

Ms. Higgins: Were you there when the Middletown Public Library was built on New Monmouth Road?

Ms. Moore: I think I was no longer there. I have very vivid memories of the tiny library on King's Highway, and it was charming. We took the children there and introduced them to reading as much as we could.

Ms. Higgins: Where did you go to work when you were finished teaching?

Ms. Moore: I was trained to be a journalist, I had newspaper experience before I became a mother, and it was my ambition to return to my field. After I had taught

at Navesink School for two years, the Lifestyle editor of *The Red Bank Register* left her job and it was offered to me. I was just delighted to accept, and then, of course, my life changed a great deal.

Ms. Higgins: Was that paper based in Red Bank at the time? Their building is out on Route 35 now, but where did you go to work everyday?

Ms. Moore: There was a small three-story building on Broad Street near Reussille's Jewelry Store. It was quite an old building. It had a tin ceiling and old gas fixtures, which had never been removed. There was no elevator -- we ran up and down the stairs dozens of times a day. The editorial offices were on the third floor. And the wire machines and the composing room were downstairs, so we had plenty of exercise.

Ms. Higgins: Who was the editor then?

Ms. Moore: In the late 1950s, the editor was James Hogan, a big, burly, gray-headed Irishman and I remember my first run-in with him. I had been there one week and I misspelled Katharine Hepburn's first name, which is spelled with an "a" instead of an "e" and he struck the fear of God into me and of course I was very, very careful after that. The managing editor was Art Kamin who eventually became editor. And there were some wonderful old newspapermen there. Tom Bly and Bill Sandford come to mind. It was a small staff, but a great group of people.

Ms. Higgins: It was the only paper in town at the time as I understand it. Of course the Middletown paper came later, but *The Register* was the paper everyone had to read. People now do a lot of complaining about parking in Red Bank. Was it easy to park in the 1950s and early 1960s?

Ms. Moore: I remember that we parked west of the office. Behind the building there was a large city parking lot, but there were meters in each parking place. There was no way you could put in more than a quarter, so we had to keep running out all day to feed the meter.

Ms. Higgins: And down the three flights of stairs.

Ms. Moore: And out the back, no matter what the weather -- it could be snowing, it could be freezing, but we had to feed the meter. Once I put a note on the meter in an attempt to excuse myself from all the running. Next weekend a policeman appeared at the back door of my home as I was in the kitchen fixing lunch for my four children. He was totally serious and wanted to haul me back to Red Bank to the police station or to jail. I told him, "I can hardly leave four small children all alone here." I suggested bringing them all in with us -- runny noses, diapers, and all -- and he speedily decided to drop the whole idea..

Ms. Higgins: That's a wonderful story. Parking has always been a bone of contention in Red Bank, and I see it was just as bad a few decades ago. When you eventually moved on from that Lifestyle page, what else did you cover then?

Ms. Moore: I was always Lifestyle editor. I worked for *The Register* for ten years in that capacity and I always wanted to move to the main copy desk and handle hard news. There were three or four men staffing that desk. I was totally capable of doing the work (and later did just that for thirty years at The Miami Herald) but I was a woman, alas, so it wasn't even considered.



In the early 1960s, Helene Moore, woman's editor of The Daily Register, accepts an award from the late Harold Kelly, publisher (left), and Art Kamin, editor

Ms. Higgins: Can you tell us some of the things you covered? What stands out in your mind that you may have covered as Lifestyle editor?

Ms. Moore: The original job title was Society Editor, and it involved weddings, engagements, tea parties and so forth. I thought the format was archaic, and I created a real lifestyle section with features about home, women and children and tried to broaden the scope and introduce family issues. I changed the makeup from the old vertical style with one-column photos to a splashier, horizontal makeup using larger, more striking photographs. And, of course, covering a much wider range of interest. And it worked pretty well; we won several statewide journalism awards.

Ms. Higgins: One of the institutions in the county is of course the Monmouth Hunt. Can you tell us something about the early days of the Monmouth Hunt?

Ms. Moore: It was a very exciting thing. We used to have a station wagon. And we would take all the children and pack a great picnic lunch and find a wonderful parking place in a lovely area with rolling hills and lots of trees. We'd pull down the tailgate and spread out a feast. It was mostly steeplechase racing, as I recall. It was really wonderfully exciting. The children and I looked forward to it every year.

Ms. Higgins: It's quite an expensive outing now. Back in the early days, it sounds as if it was much simpler.

Ms. Moore: We never thought of it as a social event -- it was just a fun family-community kind of thing to do.

Ms. Higgins: When you had finished a day's work, how did you amuse yourself? What cultural things were available in Monmouth County at that time?

Ms. Moore: Not many as I recall. There was a movie theater eventually on Route 35, which was not too far from where we lived, but we rarely went there. As the children entered their teen years, I think they would go up there sometimes by themselves. We would occasionally have live theater. I remember a D'Oyly Carte Opera Company coming to Red Bank with Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore*. I took my daughter, Christiana, who was bored to tears and escaped to the back of the theater. I remember once taking my youngest boy, Lewis, to the Boston Symphony. Occasionally, we had something like that but not terribly frequently.

Ms. Higgins: Where? Where would they play?

Ms. Moore: At the film theater in town.

Ms. Higgins: Was that the Carlton?

Ms. Moore: Yes, that sounds so familiar.

Ms. Higgins: It was a Walter Reade theater?

Ms. Moore: Yes, I think so. I haven't thought of that in years.

Ms. Higgins: Walter Reade was the developer of a huge chain of theaters and his wife, Harriet Reade, was very instrumental in the Democratic party. Can you tell us something about Harriet Reade? Do you remember her?

Ms. Moore: I remember her. I was never a close friend, but I went to Democratic Party meetings at her home, which was on Navesink River Road. She was very friendly and an intelligent woman. I never really knew her well but met her occasionally at teas and dances and similar events.

Ms. Higgins: I didn't realize they had live theater in that building as well, which of course now is Count Basie Theater. I should explain for persons reading this interview that Mrs. Moore lived in Monmouth County from 1950 through 1968, so this interview is her recollections of those times. Speaking of when your children became teenagers, what did the teenagers do to amuse themselves?



The Moore children in front

of historic farmhouse. From **Ms. Moore:** That was a very difficult period in my life. left to right: Brian, Sean, I had three boys, and I suppose everyone agrees that Lewis, and Christiana. boys are a little harder to control than girls, and they made friends through their school. They went to a middle school called Thorne School, whose students came not so much from the Middletown area, but from areas further away. They became involved with a group of boys that I didn't approve of, so it was difficult. They spent a lot of time hanging out at Campbell's Junction, near Wassermann's, which was a large general store. Does it still exist, I wonder?

Ms. Higgins: I think it does. I'm not sure.

Ms. Moore: I suppose they smoked and they drank beer and they got into scrapes; nothing terribly serious by today's standards, but upsetting for parents.

Ms. Higgins: They were interesting times to bring teenagers through, and wasn't the Middletown High School built about that time?

Ms. Moore: My children went to Middletown High School, and it was considered a new school at the time.

Ms. Higgins: I was just interviewing a teacher the other day. She commented on how terribly run down it is now.

Ms. Moore: Oh, no, really? What a pity.

Ms. Higgins: Hanging out at Campbell's Junction sounds relatively innocent given today's environment.

Ms. Moore: With what goes on today, absolutely, but I came from a very strict household. I was brought up very strictly by European parents and the scrapes my children got into were shocking to me. Viewed from the perspective of today, they were all pretty innocent. You'd call it mischief now, I suppose.

Ms. Higgins: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents? How did you come to be in Monmouth County in the 20th century?

Ms. Moore: My mother came from the north of France; my father was born in Belgrade, Serbia. He was a photographer. He came to the United States with his family early in the early 20th century. My mother came about 1908, about ten years or so later. They both made their homes in New York and met there at a party. My mother spoke only French, her native language, so the conversation at the party was totally incomprehensible to her. My father, however, was a linguist. Among his languages was French, so he took her under his wing. When I grew up I worked as a newspaper reporter and I moved south. I worked for *The New Orleans Item* at one time, and I met my husband in New Orleans. He

wanted to buy a farm on which to raise our children and that's how we came to Monmouth County.

Ms. Higgins: Then you attended public schools in Manhattan.

Ms. Moore: I attended elementary and high school there and I was graduated from Hunter College, which is part of the city university system.

Ms. Higgins: I'm trying to understand the cultural milieu of Monmouth County in 1950. Were there many theater groups? You say you taught in Navesink; was that Navesink Library theater group active at that time? Were there other theater groups? There are a lot of local theater groups now. I'm trying to understand the history of these groups.

Ms. Moore: I don't think they existed when I first arrived, or if they did, I was not aware of them. When the children were about ten or twelve, I became involved with what was called Little Theater. I don't remember Navesink being part of the name. I had always loved theater. We put on plays for children and toured the county schools. Occasionally there were roles our productions for children, and we would round up our own children to appear. I remember particularly one in which we needed a lot of trees and shrubs, and so we outfitted the children, including my brood, in Dr. Denton pajamas dyed green. For those who don't know, those are the pajamas with covered feet. Our children had a wonderful time cavorting around the stage in their Dr. Dentons.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever act yourself in any of these productions?

Ms. Moore: Oh, yes, I acted in all of them that I possibly could. Eventually, the little theater became headquartered at the *Old Mill*, which I believe was owned by Mr. Geza DeVegh, who was a charming Hungarian expatriate. He was a true European gentleman. He was tall and slim and had delightful manners. He had one of those little, very continental, pencil-thin mustaches, and he was a very courtly person. He was very important in the cultural growth of the community because he fostered cultural events, music, and plays, and so forth. He had this wonderful atmospheric old building in Tinton Falls that he could offer to groups like ours. It was a pretty rickety place. It was ancient and needed a great deal of maintenance. We performed there and we always rehearsed there.

Ms. Higgins: It's called *The Grist Mill* now. It still is there on the mill, and one sits there and looks at the water. Living so close to the seashore, did you take your family to the beach often, and if so, which beach did you go to?

Ms. Moore: I had a friend who lived in Highlands and down at the bottom of the hill, almost under the bridge, there was a little white beach that was very small and not particularly crowded. We used to take the children swimming there. Later we went out to Sandy Hook after it opened up, and that was more of a

project because then we really had to count heads to keep track of our broods. But that was a charming spot, with lots of space and surf.

Ms. Higgins: We weren't doing anything to keep the ocean clean, and what was happening?

Ms. Moore: We were so unsophisticated about conservation, we had no idea what was happening and what the future would bring.

Ms. Higgins: I often think that of all the depressing ecological events of the 20th century; one of the good things is we do seem to have reversed the trend of soiling the water, and waters that were not clean are now clean. We now we have to keep them clean.

Ms. Moore: I think it's a wonderful trend and I hope our children don't forget the lessons that we learned.

Ms. Higgins: We had some famous people in the area who were portrait painters. Some portrait painters have gone on to become national and even in some cases internationally noted. What was the art scene a few decades ago?

Ms. Moore: My daughter was painted by Mary Sheehan. Her portrait as Alice in Wonderland hangs in the Middletown Library. She had long blonde hair, and Mary thought she would be the ideal Alice. And she also painted a portrait of my oldest son, Sean, which now hangs in my living room.



Christiana Moore poses as Middletown artist Mary Sheehan puts finishing touches to her painting of Alice in Wonderland, commissioned in the 1960s.

Ms. Higgins: Were foreign films available in this area when you came here?

Ms. Moore: I think we went to New York for something like that. But you know you have to realize that not only were cultural advantages fewer then, but also I lived a very different kind of life. I had four small children who were a year to two years apart in age, and I really didn't have the time to spend enjoying myself, so perhaps I was not aware.

Ms. Higgins: While you were working at the newspaper and while you were active in what we might call "grass roots politics," can you tell us something about the people who went on to become nationally famous?

Ms. Moore: Katherine Elkus White, who became ambassador to Denmark during the Johnson Administration, was mayor of Red Bank and she was very much a

local political celebrity. She also came from a moneyed family, and had a beautiful home in Red Bank. She ran for office while I was living there -- was it for Congress? We did a lot of interviews and stories about her. My then husband, Lewis Moore, who was an attorney, became involved in her campaign and drove her a number of times throughout the state to campaign rallies. I also remember Gov. Bob Meyner and Helen Meyner very well. Helen Meyner was very gracious to the press and once invited a number of women reporters to the governor's mansion and entertained us royally. Harrison Williams, I believe, was running for the U.S. Senate at the time, and we gave what was called a "coffee" for him. This was a very common community political event -- people would hold little get-togethers in their homes and invite neighbors to hear the candidates speak. Harrison Williams spoke in our living room. He stood in front of the Adams fireplace, surrounded by chairs. I remember this afternoon particularly, not because Mr. Williams spoke so eloquently, but because one of the local functionaries arrived late, a very large man (I'm being diplomatic), and sat down in the back of the room in an old mahogany Queen Anne chair. He was a *very* large man, and as he relaxed against the chair's back, there was a resounding crack as the wood splintered. Everyone froze momentarily, turned and stared, and the poor man was dreadfully embarrassed.

Ms. Higgins: Well, Harrison Williams did go on to become U.S. Senator. Judge Pat McGann was also coming into his own during that time frame; wasn't he a member of the Democratic Party at the time?

Ms. Moore: Yes, he was a member of the party and very active in it. I don't remember all the offices he held. He was very well known and very well liked in the community when he was a young attorney.

Ms. Higgins: Now he is a prominent judge in Monmouth County. If you have anything you would like to pass on to future generations in the way of advice, what kind of advice would that be?

Ms. Moore: Do you mean to children, teenagers in particular?

Ms. Higgins: Subsequent generations of Americans as we embark upon this new millennium. You did say you wish we would keep the lessons of learning how to be more wise as far as ecology goes -- things like that.

Ms. Moore: I'd like to see as many young people as possible get a complete education. I can't over-emphasize the importance of that. I think it's important for the nation to have an educated citizenry as much as is possible. I think a return to the search for peace and brotherhood is vital. I'd like to see an end of war, an end to violence, and an end to drugs.

Ms. Higgins: Of course your children grew up watching you and your husband trying to influence the times, as you were then trying to take a part in the political process, and now there is widespread lack of interest in any kind of politics.

Ms. Moore: Since that time we've lost our respect for politicians. We've lost our respect for office holders. I think the Nixon era and Watergate, the Clinton era, and a lot of local politicians have contributed to this phenomenon and it's a great pity. We don't have heroes anymore. We have billion-dollar sports figures. We have rock stars. Do I sound like an old fogey from an ancient generation? But I think it's so true.

Ms. Higgins: I wish personally we could bring back the era of grass roots politics that was practiced by the Democratic party in Middletown; probably the Republican party as well.

Ms. Moore: The average person participated, and that was a very healthy thing.

Ms. Higgins: And you being hesitant about registering as a Democrat showed there was an interest in politics, and an interest in how you reacted with your party and with your candidates. On a more personal level, can you describe any stories or anecdotes that you experienced as a mother or that you remember being passed down from your mother or father? Anything that happened on the farm that gave a laugh to your family or friends?

Ms. Moore: We had a lot of animals. We were not a great livestock farm, but we had a little of this and a little of that. And it was wonderful for the children. We had an old Cadillac that we used in order to run around the neighborhood -- great transportation for four children and their parents. We parked it in the driveway one day. I went shopping with a friend, and was gone for maybe an hour or so, and came back to find that one of the children had left one of the rear doors of the Cadillac open. One of the goats was having a great time in the back seat pulling the kapok out of the upholstery and chewing away. We had such a laugh over that. How we could laugh about ruined upholstery in the Cadillac, I don't know, but we always thought that someday if we wrote a memoir, we'd call it the *The Goat in the Cadillac*.



Lewis Moore, Jr. pets a new calf on the Moore farm in New Monmouth. The Lone Oak Estates (background) was the former Ralph Morford Farm.

Ms. Higgins: That's a wonderful story. You remodeled the house. Were there any stories about that?

Ms. Moore: I remember pulling down a ceiling in a large recreation room that I suppose was the dining room back in the old days. All kinds of debris emerged

out of that ceiling: dry, desiccated cobs of corn, and the corpse of a rat long dead. It was very historical debris!

Ms. Higgins: Your house was how many years old?

Ms. Moore: A portion of it was about 200 years old, another portion was about 100, and of course I'm speaking of the 1950s.

Ms. Higgins: So you can add almost another fifty years onto that.

Ms. Moore: I've always wanted to research it, but never got around to it. When we were remodeling the new portion the walls were noticeably bowed out, so my husband wanted to reconstruct them. They removed the front wall of the house so that it looked like an old dollhouse with the front panel off and one could peer inside and see all the rooms.

Ms. Higgins: I hope it was during the summertime.

Ms. Moore: Oh, indeed it was. We were open to the elements and were sitting in the dining room with the children around the table. My daughter, who was then maybe eight or nine years old, was seated with her back to the open area where the wall had been removed and behind her was just an expanse of field and meadow. She made the mistake of getting up from the table very suddenly and pushing her chair back, which of course tipped over, and she fell out of the house and landed down in the shrubbery.

Ms. Higgins: Lots of adventures pulling Middletown Township from the 17th century to the 20th.

Ms. Moore: We made a nice-looking house out of it eventually, but it wasn't an easy task.

Ms. Higgins: When you finished it, did it look colonial?

Ms. Moore: Yes, we tried to keep it as authentic as possible, but we made a number of mistakes.



**A 1990s photo of the
farmhouse at 23 Morford Road**

Ms. Higgins: What does the house look like now? **after several renovations**

Ms. Moore: It looks very much as we completed it, but some of the subsequent owners made some strange changes. For instance, it had very colonial -style rectangular windows. They removed those and put in large expanses of picture windows, which I'm sure brought a great deal more light and foliage and scenery into the house, but from the outside it looks very, very odd. It's not only no longer authentic, but it's unbalanced and not correctly proportioned.

Ms. Higgins: I wonder if that would be possible now because so many Monmouth County communities have initiated laws that these old houses cannot be changed.

Ms. Moore: Yes, and I wish that something like that could have saved this house, which had a lot of charm. It was not a comfortable house to live in, but it could have been made to be comfortable.

Ms. Higgins: If you could make a change in Monmouth County, what would that change be? If you could wave a wand and say this is going to be different in Monmouth County, what do you think you would like to do?

Ms. Moore: I don't think that's a fair question because I've not lived here since 1968. I've made several visits for maybe three or four days at a time, but I don't think I'm qualified to answer that.

Ms. Higgins: You do know that *Money Magazine* a year or so ago [1999] voted Monmouth County one of the top three places to live in the country?

Ms. Moore: Yes, I did hear that and I was delighted. I take of a sort of proprietary interest in Monmouth County, as if I had something to do with it, which of course I did not. I'm glad many people have discovered its charms and I hope they won't overpopulate it and ruin it as a result.

Ms. Higgins: It's too late to overpopulate it, it already is, but Monmouth County is still a great place to live. When you came down Route 35 in 1950, was it a one-lane highway route?

Ms. Moore: Route 35 was a road passing through farm country and if you saw five cars a day on Cherry Tree Farm Road, it was considered busy. The access to our farm was by Morford Road, which turned off Cherry Tree Farm Road, and it was a very narrow lane. About half way up it became a dirt lane. It was extremely rural. I used to look through the kitchen window and watch the children trudge up that lane, past Ralph Morford's farm, after they left the school bus. It was charming. I'm sure it's completely different now.

Ms. Higgins: Thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us.

Ms. Moore: It was a pleasure.