



Interview with John O'Brien

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

Date of Interview: September 28, 1999

Name of Interviewer: Flora Higgins

**Premises of Interview: Eastern Branch, Monmouth County Library,
Shrewsbury, NJ**

Birth Date of Subject: December 31, 1932

Ms. Higgins: Mr. O'Brien, thank you for coming here to be interviewed and telling us what it was like growing up in Middletown Township.

Mr. O'Brien: Middletown Township was very rural in the 1930s and 1940s. I was brought up on a farm in the Chapel Hill section of Middletown in Leonardo. We lived on the corner acre of my grandmother's farm. The roads were unpaved and transportation was nil, basically. We went to school and church in Atlantic Highlands, which is approximately three miles away, and we walked in both directions. In those days, being a Catholic, if you went to church on Sunday to receive communion, you had to fast from midnight the night before, so when you got home from church you were rather thirsty. There was nothing better than a cold glass of our well water.

Ms. Higgins: Transportation being a problem, did you get to enjoy much Monmouth County seashore?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, we were only about a half-mile or so from the bay, and we did a lot on the bay. We swam in the summer time, we'd seine for bait fish. My uncle had an oak rowboat that he built from driftwood, and when I was in high school, I used to use the boat to take my girlfriend out in the water. I'd swear the oars would bend as you used the oars in the water because the oak was so heavy. But one of my most significant memories is probably pre-teen. The weather in those days seemed to be much colder in the winter time, and we used to go down for what we called frost fishing. At that time when the first frost came in, the fish would come in close to shore, and the small waves would lap them onto the beach. They were semi-stunned from the cold water, and we'd just walk

along with a burlap sack and pick them up and bring them home. I can remember doing that on many occasions, but I can not remember what we did with them when we got them home.

Ms. Higgins: Did they go right into the freezer, being partially frozen anyway, or the frying pan?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, at that time we didn't have a freezer, we had what was called an icebox. And so you had very little space to do any freezing. You were lucky to keep things cool for a while.

Ms. Higgins: You're not the first person I have interviewed to mention that the winters are not as cold as they used to be. Do you remember the river freezing over?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, I remember the bay freezing over. There is an oral memory that's passed down. My father had had a Model T Ford, and the bay froze over from Leonardo to the tip of Sandy Hook, and the story goes that he drove the Model T Ford across the bay -- across the ice to the tip of Sandy Hook. He also used to tell stories of other fellows who came out of Murphy's Tavern who tried the same thing, but the ice wasn't quite strong enough, and they lost their vehicles. The Murphy's Tavern that I'm referring to at that time was actually called Boozies Depot Inn. It was adjacent to the railroad station in Leonardo. And I believe it was owned by a family by the name of Murphy.



*The Model T
owned by John
O'Brien's father*

Ms. Higgins: So how did your people happen to come to Monmouth County and end up in Leonardo and Chapel Hill?

Mr. O'Brien: That's a mystery that remains to this day. I've been doing a lot of genealogy work, and I have not been able to identify exactly how or where or when they arrived in this country. But my father's side of the family, the O'Briens, first showed up in the 1850 Federal Census both as single people in Middletown. I have not been able to find their passenger list records or their port of entry to date, although I'm still working on that issue.

Ms. Higgins: Of course you know of The Church of Latter Day Saints.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, I have been there a number of times. I have found some information, but with no verbal information on whether they had any brothers or sisters, or parents' names, or even the exact date of entry, it's difficult, and there are a lot of dead end streets, and you have to try all of them to find the one that has the outlet you're looking for.

Ms. Higgins: O'Brien is such a common name, too.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes. Just like Smith.

Ms. Higgins: Back to this Model T across the river. Would horses go across the bay too? Did you travel about on the frozen bay?

Mr. O'Brien: I would imagine so, but the only stories I remember about the river are people going ice fishing and ice boating. But when you ice boated the river was frozen from shore to shore so I could well imagine that horses went on it.

Ms. Higgins: Did you cut ice from the bay for the iceboxes?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I believe the generation prior to myself did, but in Chapel Hill on the opposite side of the hill, the Route 35 side, there was an Old Mill pond and they used to cut ice there. This was on Whippoorwill Valley Road as it comes off of Chapel Hill Road.

Ms. Higgins: It's a good thing we're not dependent on that ice now. Did you ever go down and swim in the Highlands River?

Mr. O'Brien: No, we always had the bay, and Highlands was a little too far for us without having any vehicle. I was the first of three children and my father died when I was age seven. My mother did not drive, and we had no transportation other than what my uncle from the farm provided us. And the only place he basically took us was to church on a Sunday when weather was bad. Other than that we basically walked.

Ms. Higgins: And row boated.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, row boated.

Ms. Higgins: When you were growing up did you take a trip to Newark or New York City?

Mr. O'Brien: I was lucky in that my mother had five sisters, one of whom lived in the family home in Leonardo, and she worked in Manhattan for many, many years, so most of the places we visited were through her benevolence. She took us to the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Center, and I think at one point we had even gone to one of the plays at Radio City Music Hall.

Ms. Higgins: Well, that was quite a cultural background for that time.

Mr. O'Brien: I think in most cases we enjoyed the train rides, because the trains used to come right along the shore on the old Jersey Central line. But most of the time she'd take us down to Spring Lake on the train once or twice during the summer to go swimming, and the thing I remember there was that when you walked into the water you could walk in up to your waist and look down and still

see your toes. Today if you walk in the water and look down you probably can't see more than an inch or two deep.

Ms. Higgins: Actually, during the past three or four years you have been able to see your toes on certain days.

Mr. O'Brien: We've come back around.

Ms. Higgins: One thing I think has been very good about the twentieth century is that we have reversed the trend of abusing our water sources. Cindy Zipf was largely responsible for that locally. Was your mother Irish as well?

Mr. O'Brien: No, my mother was German. Her whole family side was German, so I've got fifty percent German on her side and fifty percent Irish on my father's side. My mother's father died within a month or so of my birth, so I really have no recollection of him. Her mother died early in my life also, so I have very, very little memory of her other than what I have in photographs. Same thing on my Irish side. I don't remember my grandfather at all because he died when I was very young, but my grandmother had a lot to do with raising me. My father died, and my mother had to go to work.



**Mary Agnes
Ahern
John O'Brien's
paternal
grandmother,
circa 1888**



**Charles
O'Brien
John O'Brien's
father
circa 1930**

Ms. Higgins: You were the eldest of three boys you said?

Mr. O'Brien: No, of three children. I had a sister who was directly behind me, and then a brother younger than that.

Ms. Higgins: Where did your mother work?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, when she first went to work, she worked in Eisner's Clothing Factory in Red Bank, and she had to get up early in the morning to take the bus to go to work, which meant that I had to take care of my brother and sister and make sure we got to school and back on time. And during the summer months that meant riding my brother on the handle bars of my bicycle, so I don't remember much of seeing the route going down there, only of the shoulder on the side of the road. That and the dogs that used to chase us.

Ms. Higgins: Eisner's was an old store even then, wasn't it?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, it was an old factory building, yes. But the Eisner family had quite a lot of employees. Most of their work was done for government contracts making military uniforms. As a matter of fact, I have one story from there. When

the quality control line found irregularities in something that was made, it was put aside for correction, if possible. If the contract was ended before that was completed, then those items were available for purchase by the employees. My mother had purchased for me, after I got out of high school, a navy foul weather jacket. The day I enlisted in the Navy, I wore that. When we were inducted, we had to strip naked in a room and leave all of our clothes in pile. We were told the Red Cross would send them to our homes. None of it ever got to our homes. When I got aboard ship I was issued a foul weather jacket that was nowhere near the quality of what I had. In fact, it had no buttons on it, the zipper didn't work, and I had to use a rope to tie it around my waist, and yet this brand new one I went in there with was somehow sent elsewhere.



*John O'Brien,
1952 (with
Sandy Hook in
the
background)*

Ms. Higgins: When did you join?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I joined in January 1952. I was out of high school about two years.

Ms. Higgins: Why was the Navy in such bad shape?

Mr. O'Brien: Who knows? I don't know that this was characteristic of the Navy in general, but I was on a small destroyer, and maybe they were on the bottom of the totem pole. I was in during the Korean War.

Ms. Higgins: What was the name of the destroyer?

Mr. O'Brien: USS Brenner DDR 807. Home ported in Newport, Rhode Island.

Ms. Higgins: Where did you go to High School?

Mr. O'Brien: It was called Leonardo High School at that time, but used the initials MTHS (Middletown High School). The building is still there. As a matter of fact, right now it's under renovation. It is one of the junior high schools in town, and they are putting a large addition on it.

Ms. Higgins: And you must have married somewhere along the line?

Mr. O'Brien: Oh, yes, somewhere along the line I fell prey. It was after I had gotten out of the Navy and I went down to Monmouth College before it became Monmouth University and I saw this good looking red-head with a strange walk. I happened to mention her at home one day to my brother, and he said, "Oh, that sounds like Sally. She's a good friend of my girlfriend." And through that combination, I was eventually reeled in.

Ms. Higgins: And did your brother marry the girlfriend?

Mr. O'Brien: Not that girlfriend, but he did marry another girlfriend and they eventually moved to California. He subsequently died in Idaho.



**John and Sally
O'Brien,
present day**

Ms. Higgins: Were your children raised here as well? Tell me about your children.

Mr. O'Brien: I have three boys. The oldest son is Michael. He is currently thirty-nine years old. He is unmarried and still living at home. He's had many girlfriends, but nothing seems to last. He works in a contact lens manufacturing company as a customer service representative. My next son is also unmarried. At the present time, he is living in Brussels, Belgium. He works for an international advertising outfit. And his original assignment in the international end of it was in Mexico City, Mexico, where he spent six years. He's now completed his third year in Brussels and is in the process of moving the office to Paris.

Ms. Higgins: It doesn't sound like he has time to get married.

Mr. O'Brien: That's absolutely true. He's probably working twelve to fourteen hours a day, sometimes six to seven days a week. It's been a difficult time for him, but he seems to enjoy it, as long as he can keep burning the candles at both ends. He's got more power than I have. My youngest son is William, and he lives in Middletown also. He is right on the border to Atlantic Highlands. He met his wife up in New Hampshire at Franklin Pierce College. They have one son, Jacob, who was baptized last Saturday. At long last.

Ms. Higgins: Congratulations.

Mr. O'Brien: Thank you very much.

Ms. Higgins: What are you most proud of in your life?

Mr. O'Brien: I think family. Knowing the difficulties that we had as a family without a father, how my mother had kept us together, and kept food on the table. I think I am most proud of the fact that I have three good sons. They have not created any problems for us or society. They seem to be making their own way. Not everything is perfect, neither were their parents, but I think I am most proud of the family.

Ms. Higgins: It does sound like a nice family. It must be wonderful to have them all close by except for the one who is going overseas most of the time. Have you been influential in any changes in Monmouth County other than being a

contributing citizen?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I don't know if I could say that I was instrumental in making any changes, but I hopefully had some influence on a lot of the young folks I spent a lot of time in soccer programs with the young people. I spent a long time with the Boy Scouts of America as cub master for the local cub pack, and on the membership committee, and on the organizational committee for the Boy Scouts. I used to take my summer vacations away from my family to take the troop to Forestburg, New York for two weeks because they had nobody to take them. So I spent many summers at Forestburg being the father to twenty-five or thirty kids.



*John O'Brien
while in the Boy
Scouts of America*

Ms. Higgins: You may well have taken our sons who are now forty-five and forty-three. They weren't totally keen on Boy Scouts, but they stuck with it because they loved Forestburg. It had quite an impact on their lives. So you see here, without even knowing it, you were an influence and very much for the good.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, the strangest thing is when you walk down a street in Red Bank, and all of a sudden somebody comes up to you and says, "Hi, Mr. O'Brien," and you look up at them and say, "I haven't the foggiest idea who you are," and he says, "Oh, I was in your cub pack or I was in your troop, my name is" And I'd say, "Gee, when I knew you, I'd look down at you and now I have to look up at you."

Ms. Higgins: Oh, I still remember those trips to Forestburg. We have pictures of them. Both boys would scramble to get their boy scouting obligations in order because that had to be done before one went. Well, thank you for that. We were talking the other day with an interviewee who was very active in the Democratic Party. Were you active in either the Republican or Democratic Party in Middletown?

Mr. O'Brien: No. I've known people in the various parties. I have never affiliated as far as organization goes with any one party. I like to consider myself more of an Independent, although if I look at my voting record it would probably be more weighted on the Democratic side. I kind of feel that the Democrats seem to give more to the people rather than to big businesses. One of the problems in Middletown is that the Democrats don't seem to have any real viable candidates to run. One thing I don't like in Middletown is the fact it's been run by a one party system for so long. I don't care which party it is, I feel we need to get both sides in there and get the voices heard.

Ms. Higgins: I also wanted to ask you if any places you have lived were owned ever by the Stout family?

Mr. O'Brien: Not that I'm aware of, but I know that when my mother was a young girl, her family had lived in one of the so-called "Bowne houses." It is the Bowne house that is now between Route 36 and Leonardville Road down near Beacon Hill Country Club.



John O'Brien as an infant held by his mother, in front of an old Bowne House, circa 1933.



Emma Klass, John O'Brien's mother, circa 1930.

Ms. Higgins: Old, old family in the area.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes. As a young girl, my mother also worked at the Rice Estate, which is now referred to as Croyden Hall.

Ms. Higgins: Your mother sounds very busy with all those children and all those jobs.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, she was.

Ms. Higgins: She did it without a husband for most of the time.

Mr. O'Brien: An awful lot of credit goes to her for whatever it is I am today.

Ms. Higgins: Can you think of any people who have influenced your life in Monmouth County?

Mr. O'Brien: The first one that comes to mind is Father Callahan, who later became Monsignor Callahan for St. Agnes Church in Atlantic Highlands. He sort of monitored us going through the school. He knew that we were a family without a father and in poor financial circumstances, and so he kind of looked over our shoulder and gave us some direction. At the time I couldn't understand why, when I lived probably the furthest from the church, I always had the earliest mass to serve. But I then found out that right after mass he brought me into the rectory and fed me breakfast. I can remember on one particular occasion I came in, and he didn't think too much of the jacket that I was wearing. He said, "Cold weather

is coming--you need something more than that. Come on down to the church basement." And in the church basement was a collection of clothing gathered for the missions. We went through and selected two winter jackets for me. I can remember serving mass with him where dogs would follow him all over, and a dog would come into the Sacresty and when he went on to the altar, the dog would walk to the doorway and stop, and not go into the altar; he would wait there until mass was over and Father came out. Father would walk through Atlantic Highlands and kids would follow him all over. He'd take them to the ice cream store and buy them ice cream. It was never my luck, because I lived in the other direction and had to leave, but he was quite a man. I remember him trying to keep the old church going. I remember holes in the church floor. He'd take Campbell's Soup cans and open them up and nail them over the holes. There were holes in the roof, and birds would be flying around during mass. He was just such an old kindly gentleman. I don't think I ever heard him raise his voice at anybody for any reason.

Ms. Higgins: So he had an influence on you, which you probably passed along yourself in certain circumstances.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I hope whatever it was, it was good. I heard a story at one time, somebody talking about another individual and all bad things he had done and what not. The other individual said, "Nobody is totally bad; at least he can serve as a bad example."

Ms. Higgins: What other activities did you and your friends do to amuse yourself?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, we ice skated but we ice skated in the swamps where it had clumps of grass through the whole thing and you couldn't skate in a straight line. Most of these were places that were only four or five inches deep, and when they froze over we skated around there. We did skate though at Hosfords Pond in Leonardo, which is now a housing development. That was adjacent to the Schimmel dairy farm, but there wasn't much ice-skating done by us. It was too far to go to get to anything; we had no transportation.

Ms. Higgins: You had good sledding on Chapel Hill.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, we had good sledding right on the farm, and I have a child's memory. I can remember the upper end of the farm, which was basically where we grew the corn, was a pretty good slope. This is one memory I have with my father. We had a big snow storm followed by sleet, and the snow was glazed over, and he took me and my brother up to the top of the slope. The three of us together came down on a sled, but with the ice, you couldn't steer the sled. There was a fence line along the side of the road with barbed wire on it, and the snow was up to the second strand. Not being able to steer the sled, we headed right toward the barbed wire. My father pushed my brother in one direction, and

pulled me to jump in the other. When we jumped off the sled, we probably went as far on our bottoms as we did on the sled, but we missed the barbed wire.

Ms. Higgins: When did you begin work?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, that was one of the problems I had in high school. Being the oldest child, I was always expected to bring some money in to help support the house. So I was not really allowed to play sports in high school, which I really wanted to do, but I was so skinny at the time that a good wind would have blown me away, anyhow.

Ms. Higgins: All that biking.

Mr. O'Brien: But my jobs basically were cleaning cellars and cutting lawns and trimming hedges and shoveling sidewalks and that type of thing. My first paying job was working for the A & P in Leonardo on Leonard Avenue. This A & P was in a block of commercial stores, and it was prior to most supermarkets. In the store you had three people: the manager, the assistant manager, and me. And it was always my job to unload the trucks. At that time, we had to mark all the items with a stamp, so we had to do this in the back room and then load the shelves. There were no cash registers like you have today. People would come in and come up to the counter and then place their order with you. You would have to go get it and bring it back to the counter, then with your pencil you would write the price on the side of a brown paper bag, and when you were all done, the clerk added it all up and then charged them the money. And I can remember a couple times in there, and hopefully this lady is no longer living, but I can remember being up on the ladder stocking the top shelves and all of a sudden the manager is saying to the assistant manager, "Come on in the back room. I need you right now. John, take care of the counter, will you?" and I knew immediately that Mrs. Murphy was coming. Mrs. Murphy had the reputation of out talking any truck driver in the typical truck driver language that you'd ever want to think of.

Ms. Higgins: What was Mrs. Murphy's problem?

Mr. O'Brien: She liked four letter words.

Ms. Higgins: And she would use them to a young boy?

Mr. O'Brien: Nearly anybody! So the manager and the assistant manager were always prepared to duck out of the way. It took me about two years of working there to finally check down the roads through the window and see her coming, and every once in a while I could duck to the back.

Ms. Higgins: She apparently didn't like your merchandise or anything else.

Mr. O'Brien: No, I think it was just her manner of being.

Ms. Higgins: I'm still surprised that the manager and assistant manager would leave that for you to deal with. You must have been pretty good though, adding all those figures.

Mr. O'Brien: Well you had to; that's the way society was then. You didn't have any alternative; you didn't know any different.

Ms. Higgins: This is true.

Mr. O'Brien: You know, I don't know if it would involve any of you right now, but I had a thought tickler on the way over here today. Talking about Mrs. Murphy reminded me. I had NPR radio on coming in, and they were talking about collectibles. They were talking about the Honas Wagner baseball card as being a collectible. Wagner objected to this card being given out free because it was given out within the pack of Sweet Caporal cigarettes. Sweet Caporal cigarettes were one of the things I had to sell in the store, and I can remember the first time somebody came in and ask me for a carton of Sweet Caporal. I had no idea what it was. "Don't you know what it is? It's under the counter." I had to go into the back room to find out from the manager what Sweet Caporal was and then I found out they were cigarettes. It seems strange that today on the way over here, it re-tickled my memory.

Ms. Higgins: It also seems strange you didn't know.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, nobody in my family smoked, and I was not around people who smoked. I really had no idea what cigarettes were. You weren't allowed to listen to radio that much for advertising. We'd listen to Gabriel Heater and folks like that with the news, and the "Lone Ranger", but only if your homework was done.

Ms. Higgins: How about "The FBI In Peace and War"?

Mr. O'Brien: Oh yes, and "Jack Armstrong--The All-American Boy" on Saturdays and a few of the kids' programs, "Red Rider" and a few things like that. I can remember I guess it was about 1951. I was already out of high school when we got our first television set, and my mother discovered professional wrestling.



Emma O'Brien, **Ms. Higgins:** I like your mother. I really like your mother. My son
circa 1952 loves professional wrestling; he says I just miss all the
John O'Brien's subtleties.
mother

Mr. O'Brien: Well, they were probably the greatest actors in the world, but anything other than that I don't know. It's a waste of time. My mother liked Gorgeous George.

Ms. Higgins: We haven't talked much about your brother and sister. What are they doing?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, my brother is now deceased. He moved to California and he worked for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation. He was a diesel mechanic for their buses. He smoked quite heavily and he wound up with emphysema. They moved to Idaho and he was on constant oxygen. He eventually died with emphysema. He had a wife and several children. When my mother died, he and two of his children came North for the funeral. My sister and I were not very close. We used to battle quite a bit as kids. She'd do whatever she could to annoy me, and I could only take it so long. I'd retaliate. We'd both get in trouble that way. Somewhere along the line she got off track and we were a strict Catholic family. The first occurrence that I can remember was when I was home on a weekend from the Navy and my mother was pretty well shook up. She said that Rita had gone out with a fellow against my mother's will. I asked, "Why didn't you want her to date him?" She said that the fellow came in the house drunk. And while my sister was changing to go out, he pointed to my picture in uniform on top of the TV set, and his question to her was, "Who's that son of a bitch?" My mother told him to get out of the house, went and got my sister and said, "You're not going out with him," and my sister said, "Yes, I am," and about three months later she comes in on a Saturday. And Saturday was the great cleaning day in the house, and my mother thought my sister was still sleeping. Rita walked down the driveway and said, "Mom, I'm leaving, I just got married." My mother discovered that my sister had taken her clothes out of the house over the past week. She had married this individual. She stayed married to him for several years, then divorced, and then she married somebody else. I'm trying to remember now: it must to be close to twenty years ago she worked in the same general area that I did, and I came in to work one day, and one of the gals was saying, "We didn't see you at the party last night." I said, "What party was that?" "Your sister's going away party." "Going away where?" "She didn't tell you she's moving to Hawaii?" So I said, "No, as far as I know she stills lives in Eatontown." Well, thirteen years later, I get a phone call on New Year's Day from my sister who had had a few nips, I believe, and wanted to know why I never got in touch with her. I said, "Number one, you never told me where you were or an address or that you were even going." So today we have sort of a strange relationship. We write maybe twice a year. During Christmas time there might be a phone call but we are not close. The day Rita got married my mother wrote in the Bible, "Rita died this day." She said to me, "When I die I don't want

Rita at my funeral." Now when my mother did die, I could not support that request. She was my sister and she was my mother's daughter, so I did invite her to come and she did show up.

Ms. Higgins: Another person I was interviewing went to Monmouth College when it was Monmouth Jr. College.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, that's where I started.

Ms. Higgins: It's been fun to watch that development. What did you study there?

Mr. O'Brien: I was taking electronics primarily, rather than engineering, because the electronics courses gave me more of the practical courses, and since I was going under the GI Bill, I didn't know whether I would be able to complete a four year curriculum or not, and since it was a junior college, it only offered two years. So I figured if I only got through the first two years I would have more useful knowledge. And at the same time in town there was a man who ran a radio/television appliance store. He said to me that if I went into the TV repair business, he would set me up in business in his shop to do the repair work for his shop. By the time I got out of the college though, his business had gone down hill, and I could see that it was not a money making proposition, and I elected to do other things.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember Campbell's Junction?

Mr. O'Brien: Oh, yes, that was our famous bus stop, but long prior to that, it was the trolley stop.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about the trains that came down the coast.

Mr. O'Brien: We rode the train with my aunt quite a bit, and in later years when I had to go to New York City, I used the train. If you were lucky, you'd get the right one right through to Matawan, and I can remember when they cut the line back and it just terminated in Highlands when the railroad bridge was out. They never put the bridge back in, so you used to get off near what was the merry-go-round in Highlands. That was the terminal.

Ms. Higgins: I would always take my two children down to see the carousel in Highlands, and when it burned they were grief stricken. They were four and two, and they loved that carousel. There was some speculation that the fire might have been deliberately set for the insurance. So that's where the railroad ended.

Mr. O'Brien: The railroad bridge that went across the base of the hook came down, and I think that was by a fire also. It was never rebuilt, therefore the trains couldn't go any further. Of course in Sea Bright the tracks kept washing out anyhow, and that was before they put in the stones and barriers.

Ms. Higgins: If we only knew then what we know now about transportation, we would never have let those train lines go. Look at Route 36 in the summer.

Mr. O'Brien: They should not have. Anyhow, they should've kept that railroad right-of-way and put in a monorail. But eventually the track then backed up and was then terminated in Atlantic Highlands for a number of years, and then after that, they took the trains themselves off and just ran what they called bud cars which was just one car self powered. It would run from Atlantic Highlands to Matawan and shuttle back and forth. In 1944 we moved within a block of the railroad station. Coming from a farm and moving down where the trains kept coming by was a change. It took a long time to get used to those train whistles and the clack-a-de-clack of a train going by.

Ms. Higgins: Is St. Agnes Church still in Atlantic Highlands?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, but it's the new church now that was built during the time that I was in the Navy. They tore down the old church because it was just too decrepit to repair and was not big enough for the parish.

Ms. Higgins: What do you remember about Atlantic Highlands?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, as far as the town goes, I remember primarily Center Ave. which was where the new church is now, and the St. Agnes School that I went to. And then we had the Jones Store which was a little mom and pop candy type store. When we went out at lunch time from school everybody ran down there. The movie theater was in Atlantic Highlands, which up until maybe my late teens was the only movie house I was ever into. First movie I ever saw there was *Gone With the Wind*.

Ms. Higgins: What a wonderful way to start movie going.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, my cousin who lived in the farm at the top of Chapel Hill who was about two, two and a half years older than myself, took me to the first movie and it was an afternoon matinee. And I can remember when I saw the pictures of the soldiers on the battlefield dying with guns going off, I just covered my eyes and put my head down and said, "Tell me when that's over." But when we used go in there, I think it cost us twenty cents to get into the movies. We had a quarter and we'd go to the penny candy store next door and buy penny candies up to five cents and the old fellow that ran that store didn't trust anybody. He walked around behind to make sure you didn't put something in your pocket, and would say, "You've been in here too long. Time for you to get out." The town grouch.

Ms. Higgins: Was that hardware store there when you were growing up?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, Siegfried's Hardware Store. If they didn't have nobody had it.

Ms. Higgins: That's right. You'd go in with some archaic old appliance and ask them for a little screw and they'd disappear in the back.

Mr. O'Brien: And come right out with it.

Ms. Higgins: Yes. Absolutely amazing place.

Mr. O'Brien: It is still there today. It's under new ownership, of course, but it's still there today.

Ms. Higgins: Was the ferry going back and forth?

Mr. O'Brien: I don't even remember the name of it now. It wasn't the City of Keansburg but they used to run the boats from Battery Park down to the pier in Atlantic Highlands and then people would get on a train to go to Monmouth Park Racetrack. But in my time the paddle wheelers were long gone.

Ms. Higgins: It was the City of Keansburg I was thinking of.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes that used to run to Keansburg. It was pretty efficient.

Ms. Higgins: Why did that stop?

Mr. O'Brien: I think the boats themselves just got too old and ridership went down with the train service that was there.

Ms. Higgins: And the pier was decrepit.

Mr. O'Brien: The pier in Atlantic Highlands eventually caught on fire, and I believe the Gelhaus family had owned that, and they decided not to rebuild it because they were running bus lines. It was probably a series of things, but basically I think it came down to economics.

Ms. Higgins: During the time when you and Sally were young parents, if you wanted to get dressed up and go out to a restaurant, where would you go?

Mr. O'Brien: Cedar Inn, Highlands, on Route 36. If you were headed south, it was just before you got to the bridge. It was on the right hand side with a very small parking lot. And in our family we have a very fond memory of it. Our oldest son was about two and half years old, and was still sitting in a highchair. We went in there one night for dinner, and my wife had ordered pork chop for our son. The waitress said, "Would you like to have a child's portion?" "Not for Michael." No, he ate that entire pork chop and said, "Mommy I'm hungry." We called the waitress back and ordered the second pork chop, and he ate that while the five waitresses that were in the place stood around watching. Today this man is six feet six and about 330 pounds.

Ms. Higgins: A lot of pork chops.

Mr. O'Brien: He had a good start.

Ms. Higgins: Well, that's so much fun to hear about the Cedar Inn.

Mr. O'Brien: My wife used to like Alaskan King crab legs. My mother used to talk about the amusement park on the Bayshore. It used to be in Atlantic Highlands down opposite what is a boat yard now, and they put in some housing developments, but it was on the Leonardo side of what now is the harbor. And they used to have Ferris wheels, and they had roller coaster rides. Some of the pictures of the folks on the beach at that time show the women in their bathing suits up to their necks and down to their ankles. And the men had heavy wool bathing suits. Seems like if they ever went in above their waist, they would sink.

Ms. Higgins: From Leonardo could you see the New York skyline?

Mr. O'Brien: When we were up on the farm we could. We moved in 1944 and that in itself is a story. In 1942 Earle came in, this was the Naval Ammunition Depot. And through the Right of Eminent Domain they came in and condemned all of the property and then gave you a flat fee for your home and told you to pack and get out. In 1943, our family home was basically a bungalow. My mother didn't have enough money to go out and purchase something else, and after they fixed a price on the property and the house, they offered you the right to buy the house back at a very low figure, but then you had to move it. My mother elected to do that. She had a friend who owned a small piece of property fifty by 100 in downtown Leonardo. We purchased that piece of property, hired a mason to put a foundation under it, and then she hired the "One-Man House Mover: Duffy Fisher," a Black house mover from Middletown, who single-handedly moved the house from the Chapel Hill location to its location now directly opposite what is the post office in Leonardo. But the day of the move itself is a memory burned into our minds. On a Sunday, the house had been jacked up off the foundation and placed on the flat bed truck, but it wasn't to be moved until Monday. It was a hot day. We had walked to St. Agnes Church, fasting since midnight. We walked all the way back and when we got there, there was no house! The house had completely disappeared, so we figured somebody was taking it to its new location unannounced. Then we had to retreat and head back on the route where it was going to go. We found it stuck on the railroad tracks at Appleton Ave. in Leonardo because it was on a slight incline. As we approached it, the train was pulling out of the station in Leonardo headed directly for the house, which was hung-up on the rails by the back steps. There was a man on the roof of the house with a pole to hold the power wires up so they could go underneath it. He jumped off the house, grabbed an ax, and chopped the back steps off of the house so they could pull the house off the tracks before the train got there. So that's how we lost the back steps.

Ms. Higgins: Oh that's a wonderful story.

Mr. O'Brien: In the meantime, here we are dying of thirst, you can't get in the house, it takes them another hour and a half to get it down to the place. The foundation wasn't in, so they had to back it on the property and prop it up. Luckily there was a neighbor next door who let us use the hose. And it was fun for the next month and a half with the china pot and the apple orchard across the street.

Ms. Higgins: What do you mean?

Mr. O'Brien: We had no running water in the house; we had no lavatory, so you had a china pot and the china pot had to be dumped somewhere.

Ms. Higgins: What year was that?

Mr. O'Brien: 1944.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember in that Chapel Hill area a little lighthouse?

Mr. O'Brien: There's a lighthouse on the beach and there was one up in Chapel Hill.

Ms. Higgins: Chapel Hill in the woods.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, up on the top of Chapel Hill there was a lighthouse. There was a couple who lived there and maintained the lighthouse up until the time that it was put out of service. And even that has a story. This was above Hosfords Pond, and you had to go past the cemetery, past the pond, up the hill, and in either October or November of that year--and I don't remember exactly what year it was, but it was in the late forties--we had walked up that hill and found that there had been a large fir tree knocked over by a hurricane that had fallen directly across the road just below the lighthouse. My mother knew the people living in the lighthouse. We were friends, and we were going up to visit. So when we got home, my mother said, "There's a good place to get a Christmas tree. The tree's already down. Why don't we go up and take the top of the tree and use it for our Christmas tree?" Which we did. The next day the State Police came to the door and accused us of chopping down a tree and taking it. His evidence was a child's mitten, one mitten which was too small for any of us, and was not one of ours, but he refused to accept any information that we had to show him where we had taken the tree. He just gave us a warning: "Don't ever do this again." Now opposite that lighthouse there was an old estate that only had the foundation left. It had a couple of clay tennis courts that were getting pretty old and run down, and during that period of time it was the local boy scout summer camp for St. Agnes and a couple of the other troops in the area. We camped there a number of times.

Ms. Higgins: Would that have included Highlands Boy Scouts?

Mr. O'Brien: It could very well have been.

Ms. Higgins: What were some of the medical practices when you were growing up?

Mr. O'Brien: The one that immediately comes to mind for me was the treatment for poison ivy. There was a Dr. Opperman (I believe his name was) in Atlantic Highlands. Any time we had to go the doctor we went there, and he used to treat you with some sort of a salve and then give you these little tiny white perfectly round pills the size or slightly smaller of a b-b and it was supposed to remove the itch. Today looking back at I think in reality they were candy. I think they were what we know as a placebo today. But the doctor's practices at that time were that if you couldn't get to the doctor's office, the doctor would come to the house. But of course you had to pay for it, and so rarely did we go to a doctor other for a tonsillectomy or something of that nature. I can remember my grandmother referring to hospitals as "horsepitals" and nobody ever went to a "horsepital" unless you were going to die, so the attitude toward medical practice wasn't too good. You kind of felt that it was your last chance. But the only time we really got any exceptional medical treatment, I guess were in school physical exams, and then if they found something wrong, you were referred to a doctor.

Ms. Higgins: But you all grew up on a farm and you must have hurt yourself occasionally? What did you do then?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, hurt in those days and hurting today are entirely different. Today everybody runs to the doctor for everything. At that time, wash it up, and put a bandage on it was normal. To this day I have a large scar on my ankle. We had gone out one evening to visit neighbors up near the top of the hill. I had a little red wagon. The hubcap on one side of the wagon was missing, and the cotter pin was sticking through. We had a habit of coming down the hill: you'd put one foot in the wagon, grab the steering handle, and use the other foot like a scooter to come down. Well, I had my brother in the wagon. I was trying to steer around him, but hit a rock and swung sideways, and cotter pin went in my ankle and just tore all the way down the side. And there's about a four, four and a half-inch scar there now. My mother had been a nurse, so when we got home she just cleaned it all off and put a gauze bandage on it and wrapped it up tight. Everyday we'd clean it and put salve on it. And the thing that I can remember from that is when it healed and the final gauze came off, some of the gauze strings were healed inside of the scar and I had to sit there with a pair of tweezers and try to pull these strings out through the scar.

Ms. Higgins: What was your mother's name?

Mr. O'Brien: Emma Florence Klass.

Ms. Higgins: A nurse, too!

Mr. O'Brien: Well, it starts even stranger than that. She originally started off in a convent to be a nun.



The Klass family, circa 1930s. John O'Brien's Uncle George (standing), Mr. O'Brien's maternal grandparents (sitting), and the young girl is John O'Brien's Aunt Helen.

Ms. Higgins: Is Class spelled with a "C" or a "K"?

Mr. O'Brien: That depends on which document you want to look at; she uses K. K is on the tombstones, but letters that I have received from the relatives in Germany all use the capital C. Sometimes you see the children's names listed in a group and some will have C and some will

have K.

Ms. Higgins: Was she an immigrant?

Mr. O'Brien: My mother was born here, but her parents were immigrants.

Ms. Higgins: When did she decide to become a nurse?

Mr. O'Brien: Let's see. Did she become a nurse first or a nun? I think she went in to be a nurse first and then she decided to become a nun. Why she left I don't know, but I believe it was through economic reasons of the family.

Ms. Higgins: Then she met your father?

Mr. O'Brien: Apparently.

Ms. Higgins: And there went the nunnery. What newspaper headlines stand out in your mind from Monmouth County in the past century?

Mr. O'Brien: Oh I think, VE Day, VJ Day. That time the papers that we got were basically on Sundays. We didn't get a paper during the week. The local paper at that time was basically a weekly anyhow; it only came out on Thursdays. It was the *Red Bank Register*. It came out once a week. And then it moved out here, right down the street from where we are now.

Ms. Higgins: It's not *The Register* anymore. But when that would come Thursday, what would you read first?

Mr. O'Brien: The movies, all the want ads that were in there, and help wanted, and all the good stuff. Who hit John and who got divorced, who got married.

There was a recent article in the paper which recalled a memory that I had seen in the paper at that time. That was when the ship blew up at the Earle Pier in 1946. I was in eighth grade in St. Agnes School at the time. The State Police had a system of safety patrols. You had a brass plaque that you wore on your sleeve with an elastic strap around it, and you were in fact, the crossing guard. At lunch time on this day, I was at the Avenue D and Center Ave. crossing as a safety guard, and this loud explosion went off. You could feel the whole ground shake. And this was from the explosion at Earle, and I believe it was just about a week ago there was a picture of that ship, or two pictures of that ship, in one of the local papers.

Ms. Higgins: You mentioned that you used to listen to radio programs after your homework was done. Please describe any other favorite childhood games that you used to enjoy.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, basically throwing a ball, having the dog chase it, and then chase the dog to get the ball back. My brother and I used to play baseball a fair amount. Again it is a memory of St. Agnes Grammar School that makes me laugh every time I think of it. We had a playground which was across the street from the church, a half a block from the school. It was actually a fifty by one hundred lot that the church owned between a house and what was then the Andy Richards Estate. In the Andy Richards Estate close to this empty lot which was basically our playground, he raised chickens. The chickens would get out in the high grass and they'd lay their eggs out there. Well, we were out there one day playing ball and somebody hit a foul ball into that grass, and one of the kids went in there and discovered these nice eggs warm from the sun. He picked up a couple and started throwing them back toward the rest of us, and you can imagine the smell when they hit, so I said, "Not for me," and I ran into the lot next door and I hid behind a big tree. The next thing I know somebody throws an egg, missed the kids on the field, hit my tree, broke, and fell right on the top of my head. I couldn't stand myself. I had to go over to the school trying to scrub it all off. I had to get one of the kids to get one of the nuns to come out. I said, "I'm going home." She said, "Yes, you'd better." I had three miles to go in the hot sun with a rotten egg on my head. It's not my choice of having a happy day.

Ms. Higgins: The memory seems to linger on.

Mr. O'Brien: Hopefully, it's the memory and not the smell.

Ms. Higgins: In what way do you feel your life is now different than you thought it might be?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, probably the economy and closeness of people around. I came from basically a small family and married into a large family, and now that we're getting up in years, you see the family shrink and



*The playground
at St. Agnes
Grammar
School,
circa 1945*

diminish again. It's like coming full circle. But in my growing up time, you could go out on the streets at anytime you wanted to, they didn't have paved shoulders, and there wasn't that much traffic. Today you take your life in your hands to go out on the street whether you're walking or in a car or anything else, and I'm not so sure all of this is for the good. But we have more things to get involved in today and more things that need your help. There is very little that we had that were considered temptations in those days and today that seems to be all you see. Consider the junk that's on TV for the kids to look at today. I feel sorry for parents today; they have to be far more vigilant than we ever had to be.

Ms. Higgins: If you had one thing that you wanted to leave with people listening to this over the next hundred years, and I sincerely hope this archive will be listened to and read for a long time, what would you say? What would you like to leave with the present and future generations as your values and your concerns about the next millennium?

Mr. O'Brien: Basically, I think family is everything, that includes religion, whatever religion you are. Live up to your ideals and your goals, do what you think is right, not what the society tells you is the norm. That doesn't necessarily mean its right. God gave us all the brain to know right from wrong; live up to it. Decide where you can help your fellow man.

Ms. Higgins: What was your career?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I continued at Monmouth College for my degree in electronics but the college did not get its four-year accreditation in engineering the following year. Under the GI Bill, I had one option: either change my course curriculum or change my college. If I wanted to stay in the same curriculum I would have to go to NCE, Newark College of Engineering, which now has a different name.

Ms. Higgins: Newark College of Engineering.

Mr. O'Brien: Right, but in order to get there, I'd have to use the train. Now I was going to Monmouth College five nights a week. To go by train, I would lose almost three hours a night class time, and I wouldn't be able to go five nights a week so it would take me much longer to get my degree. So, I elected to change my curriculum, but the college did not have a four-year accreditation. But about that time I met the gal who has become my wife. I had taken a full-time job and was then at Fort Monmouth. I was working in the electronics area, and I was doing pretty well, so I decided to hold off another year and hopefully the college would come in with the accreditation at that time. It did not, but then I got married and had other commitments, and I never really went back to it. But I've had a pretty good career. I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time with enough people who thought enough of me to make my way in the world. Although I would never be a millionaire, I've never planned to be, and I don't know what I would ever do if I ever was. We survived. The biggest thing

was to get the children educated and out on their own. And for the most part I think we've done that.

Ms. Higgins: Can you describe any stories that have passed down through the generations?

Mr. O'Brien: Well there's very little on the Irish side. I find more with doing my genealogy and refuting things that I had heard or not heard. As an example, I know that my father's mother came from Keansburg and I knew that she had a sister who was approximately a year younger than her, but that's all I knew about her. From doing my genealogy I've discovered at least five brothers that she had and possibly several more that might have been born in Ireland. But the Irish at that time were so pleased to be out of Ireland with what was going on there, they didn't really talk about it. Cameras were not that prolific, so you didn't have many pictures. It was not our opportunity to be around with them when they were talking, so we really had nothing in the way of word of mouth. On my German side, everybody seemed to hold a grudge against somebody. And I know this aunt who took us all around had some ongoing battle with my mother for years, and every time I'd ask my mother, "What's the problem with you and Aunt Rose?" the answer was always the same: "It's none of your business."

Ms. Higgins: Doesn't make so much family history.

Mr. O'Brien: Not much in the way of verbal history, no.

Ms. Higgins: And I would also like to ask you about your milestones.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I would say probably the first thing that I could recall is making my first communion at St. Agnes, then graduating from St. Agnes, graduating from Middletown High School. And our fiftieth reunion is coming up next year so that will be a milestone. Going into the Navy, getting a first decent job, getting out of the Navy, which was sort of an adverse milestone, it was not something I wanted to happen at the time but it was a medical reason, and I couldn't fight it. Of course one of the biggest things in my life was getting married, finding the number one gal in the country.

Ms. Higgins: If you could wave a wand and be back in Monmouth County in 1948 and direct Monmouth County development, what would you say? We really should've kept the train.

Mr. O'Brien: Absolutely. More needed to be done for public transportation, but before you could proceed the parkway came in and there was probably no way you would've known at that time other than by hind sight. Within Middletown, one of the things I wish they had done was to set aside some sort of a commercial area where tax ratables would've come in to help the homeowners and not just be known strictly as a bedroom community. I think there needed to be more

done in preserving some of our historical areas. Particularly things like the fishing industry.

Ms. Higgins: How about education in Middletown?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I went to St. Agnes Grammar School, but I went to the public high school, and the reason I went to the public high school was probably more economy than anything else. The Catholic grammar school was affiliated with the church that we belonged to: however, they did not have a high school, and we were then in the St. James district, but being out of the parish we had to pay tuition, and my mother just could not afford it, and so we went to the public high school. I think I got a decent education at Middletown High School. There were a couple of things that I wished they had changed. Some of those I think they needed to have a course in economics -- just teaching people how to run a checkbook, which unless you were taking the Home Economics and the secretarial courses, which were mostly for the girls, that was never even broached. My first classroom at Leonardo High School was in the agriculture building. Today people necessarily don't even understand agriculture. They go out and buy a plant that's already in bloom, they take it home, and water it twice, and throw it in the garbage, and tomorrow go out and buy another one.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember the Middletown Library?

Mr. O'Brien: In several different locations. At one time it was in the building that's on Kings Highway, which is now a private home. It had been the telephone building at one time and it gradually moved from place to place to place until it finally got its own home and there's a nice group that supports the Library called the Friends of the Middletown Library. My wife and I are members. You had a couple of book sales there every year to help support the library and buy different things. I'm very proud of the Middletown Library system. However, I do wish there were some way that within the county and town, even though we have our own library system, we could have an easier access to use the county library facilities. I don't know what the fee is today; it's a nominal fee to buy your membership. I used to go there quite a bit for the Sunday programs, but I don't know if they are still going on. I know they were there for a while. Middletown has several branch libraries where, when our kids were growing up, they had fantastic programs reading and teaching the children. They bring in classes and they read them stories or have them participate in reading stories and acting out stories and I think that went on a long way towards teaching kids that there's more than watching television or running around a ball field.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember the Navesink Library near the Little Red Store?

Mr. O'Brien: I remember the library, but I don't remember using it as a library, but in the back of the library is a theater, and the Monmouth Players have been

there for many, many years and for many, many years we were patrons of that and we went to many of their plays.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever act yourself?

Mr. O'Brien: No.

Ms. Higgins: I can tell you're a reader.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I read as much as I can but I don't read as much as I should. I'm spending too much time on a computer now and my eyes are starting to go after a while. Most of my memories now are of things that have been created through my genealogy. I would like to see more genealogy available to us. You had mentioned the Mormon Church History Center. If some of that material that pertains to the area could be in our own files, that would be good. I know we have the Monmouth County Historical Society. I used to be a member until they priced me out. Randall Gabrielan, who is the Middletown historian, has written several of those books, and in the Rumson book and one of the Middletown books he has a couple of pictures that came from my wife's records. Her family is an old family here. Matter of fact, her family goes back to John Cook, the founder of the *Red Bank Register*.

Ms. Higgins: Mr. O'Brien, tell us some more memories of the farm.

Mr. O'Brien: The O'Brien farm was in Chapel Hill in the Leonardo section of Middletown. It was a farm of approximately twenty-two acres. It had vegetables, fruit, berries; it did not have any livestock per se, but it was a cultivated land, other than the orchard. My home was on a corner acre of that piece of property, which had a little truck garden behind it. We left there in 1943 when Earle came in. At that time it was used as a sort of buffer zone for the Navy, and was not really used for anything. Our house had been moved off the property, and my grandmother's farmhouse, and the out buildings, I believe, were burned down some ten or twelve years later, leaving vacant land. Approximately fifteen years ago, in the early 1980s to mid 1980s, I had the occasion to work with a naval captain who was a good friend of the then commander of Earle. Through him I was able to get permission to go in and look at the old farmland. Once we got there, and I say "we" because my wife and my cousins also went, we discovered that it was now a forest. You would never know it had been cultivated land. Of my grandmother's farm, we found the stone foundation with no mortar, but it had all been filled in and nothing was left. In my child's memory, I remember the laneway coming in off of Chapel Hill Road went past the side of the house and up to a three-bay open garage. Behind it followed a pathway which went past the three-holer down to the barn. Beyond the barn was a cultivated field, and beyond that the meadows up to the stream. Going in the opposite direction about ninety degrees, you went up the hill where the cornfields and cabbage fields were, then up to the orchard and berries. The Chapel Hill Road, which

came past the house, made a ninety degree turn at the upper end of that orchard. As I remember with my child's mind, the upper end of that field was about eight or ten feet above the road level, and we as kids used to slide down it into the road. Well, when I got back there in the mid 1980s, I found that the distance between the farm house and the stream below the meadow was about one third of the distance my memory said it was! Everything was so much closer together, it was difficult to imagine how it was all crammed in there. Got up into the orchard area, and found that the upper edge of this orchard ground--that my memory said was eight or ten feet above the road level--was now about two feet above the road. You couldn't slide down it; it was only just one big step. I was remembering something entirely different. It was just strange to see that in a child's mind. We also got up to my cousin's farm house at the upper end, and the cistern that my cousin had first shown me how to make apple jack in was all filled in, and you could only find some stones of the foundation. Very little left of their property, either. But the amazing thing was that in those forty some odd years, the acreage went from cultivated land to in effect a forest today. This is almost incomprehensible. It makes you think that at the time these people bought the property in the first place, it was wooded land like this. How, with the implements available at that time, were they able to clear it and cultivate it? It's phenomenal, the strength these people had. We also saw the outhouse where you answered nature's call. The clean up procedure was basically a Sears Roebuck catalog hanging on a nail in the wall, and if you were the lucky one, you didn't get the shiny pages. Summertime is a little bit disastrous though, because the yellow jackets seem to like that nice warm human atmosphere down below, and it was very ginger sitting down. You weren't sure whether you would have to get up in a hurry or not.

Ms. Higgins: America is such a fascinating place here; we are talking about outhouses and our childhood and not only our children but we are now communicating throughout the world with computers. Do you have a computer now?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, I do. I spend an awful lot of time on line trying to do genealogy stuff, but I'm involved in so many organizations that I use it primarily for keeping membership records and putting out newsletters. I don't get the time to do the genealogy work that I want to do. I keep saying I'm gonna cut back on some of these activities and do that, and every time I do, I seem to take on another job.

Ms. Higgins: What are your organizations?

Mr. O'Brien: I belong to the National Association of Retired Federal Employees, which is a national organization which then breaks down into state federations and individual chapters. I'm involved in a local chapter. I've been just about every officer in it. I'm currently the legislative officer and the membership chairman. I'm also involved in the newsletter committee. Tied with that, I'm now tied with the New Jersey Federation of NARFE, and I've just recently taken on

their newsletter responsibility. I also belong to the Irish Federation of Monmouth County. We want to keep the Irish traditions alive, and so we schedule annual trips to the Irish Catskills to hear a lot of Irish music. We run three dances a year. We have a dance coming up in October. We march in the Belmar St. Patrick's Day parade. We have monthly meetings. We have annual picnics, and all these things are man power intensive, and my wife and I are involved in all of the above.

Ms. Higgins: Wow.

Mr. O'Brien: We're also involved in our church. Right now the church has what they call the Renew 2000 Program which is a program trying to bring people back to Bible reading and getting back into the better things in life. And these involve small group Bible readings and discussion. My wife and I are small group leaders of that. And it originally started back around 1984 for five seasons; each season is six weeks. We were group leaders then, we're now into season three of the new season, and we're still group leaders. One of the things they say about a good leader is that you can get a member of your group to become a group leader next time. My wife and I are total failures. Nobody wants to leave our group. Primarily my interest is in genealogy. My folks, to the best that I can determine, came over here during the potato famine time. The concept of the potato famine seems to be in most peoples' minds is the fact that there was a blight of the potatoes in Ireland, and therefore the people died because they had nothing else to eat. In reality, the British forced the deaths on the people by taking the other foods out of Ireland and using them in England. Therefore, the Irish natives only had the potato to rely on. The British came in and cut out any official Catholic religion, so that all the religion had to be done by priests on horseback. The potato famine itself is sort of a misconception in a lot of peoples' minds. There was a blight on the potato, but it was not the main cause of the deaths and of the people leaving the country. It was probably a good kick in the tail to get people moving, but there were other solutions to the problem at the time but they were just not allowed.

Ms. Higgins: Something comes to mind: an Irish party I went to in the 1960s at Bucky Smith's. That was a great party.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, Bucky Smith is no longer with us, but he's been a great member of the community. He opened his place to all sorts of groups for different reasons. I know we've had a number of communion breakfasts there. We've had a number of dances there, and our cub scouts used to have many of our blue and gold dinners there. I believe it's his niece who is still running the place now, and they did carry on a lot of that tradition. But of course at the same time that gives people a certain connotation: "Oh, you're going to Bucky Smith's. Are you going to get that sliced thin ham?" That's his only menu.

Ms. Higgins: It was underwater a lot, being so nearby the bay. It would flood a lot. I do remember that he was very generous.

Mr. O'Brien: A block and a half away was a home that was lived in by the lady I mentioned earlier in the interview, the sister of my father's mother who came from Keansburg. She had one sister that I was aware of, this was the one sister, and she lived right near Bucky Smith's.

Ms. Higgins: Well, your background seems to have encompassed a lot: the farming, the shore, a lot of changes that have been in Monmouth County.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, one of the changes has to do with working on the farm. My uncle used to have a farm produce delivery service, and he would take his vegetables, and make a regular route, and of course one of the first stops on the route was Murphy's Tavern. I had to sit in the truck until he came out. But then we'd go down and deliver vegetables to various places. But during the summertime, every Friday night we'd load up the truck with all of his vegetables and fruits and berries and we'd go to Bradley Beach to the Farmers Market. The Farmers Market was a fantastic place. All the farmers in the surrounding area would come in and they'd set up their stalls on Friday night and sell their vegetables up until about 11:00 or 11:30 when the crowd would leave. You'd go to sleep in your vehicle or under your vehicle or up against the lamppost or wherever you could find room. You'd open up early Saturday morning and sell until your produce was exhausted, and then you would leave. I used to go with my uncle, and my cousin, who had the farm up the hill from us, used to go with his father. And we'd wait until the old folks went to sleep. Then we'd walk around the block where there was an all night cigar store. My cousin was about two years or two and half years older than myself, and he instigated me. We'd pool all our money when we went in and buy a pack of cigarettes. And we'd walk around the block, each smoking one cigarette or thought we were smoking a cigarette. But who's going to hide the pack of cigarettes until next week? So one week, he would take them home, and the next week, I would take them home and hide them.

Ms. Higgins: They must have been awful by the end of summer.

Mr. O'Brien: I hid them in my top drawer of the dresser, my sock drawer. I don't think they were in there more than fifteen or twenty minutes and my mother found them. She laced me up one side and down the other, and she said, "The one thing I can't stand is a sneak. If you're going to smoke, smoke out in the open. But I'd better not see you smoke." Well, the cigarettes went back to my cousin, and to this day I have never had another cigarette.

Ms. Higgins: What kind of produce did you grow?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, it was basically a vegetable farm, but it had a lot of fruits and berries, and then you had corn, cabbage, potatoes, of course, lettuce. I don't remember anything like zucchini or anything of that nature.

Ms. Higgins: Was farming your grandfather's sole source of income?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, yes, but my grandfather was dead by the time I was there. This was one of my father's brothers. As a matter of fact, there were two brothers still living on the farm, but only one was able to work the farm. The older of the two had polio as a young man, and he was down in Allenwood Hospital for a number of years, and as a result of that, he wound up with one leg shorter than the other, and he wasn't able to do a lot of physical work. And he had a craft, I guess you would say, that somehow today I seem to do the same kind of thing. I'm wondering if I didn't get it from him. He used to make these little lawn ornaments that you see in different peoples' yards, like the little girl with sprinkling can with a dotted cap and things of that nature. But the thing that I remember about him the most is his ingenuity. He took one of those old Singer sewing machines, where you had the foot pedal, and took the sewing mechanism out and put a straight coping sawblade in it. He made a coping saw that operated with a foot pedal, and he cut all these things out real nice, and did all the painting. In downtown Leonardo there was a real-estate office, and he had made a model house that people today would probably say was something like a doll house. It was on display in their window for probably fifty years. The man could do almost anything with his hands. There is a story with him that I need to research and find the details on. He had worked at one time in, I believe it was in Morgan, in a black powder factory, and sometime in the mid 1940s, I believe it was, the place blew up. I'd like to find more information about that, but just haven't had the time to do it.

Ms. Higgins: The Monmouth County Historical Association used to have all the local newspapers. I don't know if they still do. The real newspapers took up rooms and rooms, and then they got wet.

Mr. O'Brien: Well, I went through their Red Bank Registers for a story that I was trying to track down for years. This has to do with my German side of the family. I have a series of letters written from Germany in the 19 teens. In several of the letters, they commented, "Sorry for your recent disasters, sorry for your bad time, sorry for your problem." But you never find out what the problem was. One day I just happened to run into somebody who said they were going through old issues of *The Register* and had seen something about a house fire. I traced that down, and sure enough, my mother's parents were renting a house on Appleton Ave. in Leonardo, and the article in the paper said the house had caught fire, and that the family got out with nothing but the clothing on their backs. In the case of my grandfather, he got out with the vest and the trousers of a brand new suit he had bought the day before, but the jacket was lost in the fire. That I read in *The Red Bank Register*. At that point and time it leads me to something else I haven't

been able to track down. The same article indicated that "Mr. Magee will hold a benefit at his theater in Atlantic Highlands, the Lyric Theater, on tomorrow evening." I have not been able to identify the theater as yet, although recently I attended a presentation and one of the fellows who was talking about an actor who lived in what I knew as the Andy Richard's Estate, and that he put on plays in the Lyric Theater. I've got to get to the Straus house in Atlantic Highlands to see what they might have on the Lyric Theater.

Ms. Higgins: I'm glad we had this opportunity to hear your stories. I love your stories; they are just so Irish, and so Monmouth County!

Mr. O'Brien: Thank you very much. Good luck.