



## Interview with Julia Rifici

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

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**Name of Interviewer: June West**

**Premises of Interview: Julia Rifici's home, Asbury Park, NJ**

**Birthdate of Subject: June 26, 1915**

**Deceased: February 7, 2004**

**Ms. West:** Ms. Rifici, would you mind giving us your date of birth and your age, please?

**Ms. Rifici:** My date of birth is June 26, 1915. I am now eighty-four years old. I have lived in Asbury Park all of my life. I remember way back when I was a child; I grew up on 1257 Washington Avenue in Asbury Park. And I went to Bangs Avenue School. From Bangs Avenue School I transferred when I was twelve years old to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School in Asbury Park. I graduated from Mt. Carmel School in 1929. I remember Asbury Park very, very well when it was a beautiful, beautiful city. And I remember during the Second World War we had a lot of different things that we had to do to help "the cause," as they said. We had to put our shades down at a certain hour. We had to make sure we had all kinds of inspections going on the roads to prevent anyone from harming us. And one of the things that they did in Asbury, under the direction of our mayor, who at that time was Mayor Thomas Shebell, and now he is deceased, was the fact that on the Boardwalk in Asbury Park, which was a gorgeous place, they had put black curtains on the Boardwalk, so the lights of the Boardwalk would not go out to the ocean where the U-boats from Germany were going in the waters to try to bomb New York Harbor. So our black curtains stopped the lights from going out to the ocean; but we continued with our activities on the



**Julia DeCesare (Rifici)**

Boardwalk. One activity was skating at the Asbury Park Casino. We had the Paramount, where they featured some of the best well-known actors in that era. One was Rudy Vallee, who was a wonderful leader of the orchestra. We had William Holden. We had Clark Gable come down. We had all these wonderful stars who came to Asbury Park and I remember every one of them, because I was there as a teenager watching them. Then we had the beautiful Berkeley Carteret, which entertained many, many beautiful public figures. So consequently, our town was one of the best known towns around the area. From there, I lived on Washington Street. I worked downtown on Cookman Avenue at the HL Green 5&10 for fifteen years. Then I went to different jobs in the area. I remember the riots on Springwood Avenue very, very clearly. I remember when the town was burning, and we couldn't get home. I had to go way out of my way to get back to my home, which was on Stule Avenue in Asbury Park, because the police and the FBI agents were all over town while the town was burning on Springwood Avenue.

**Ms. West:** Do you remember the year that was?

**Ms. Rifici:** It most have been at least forty years ago. So I would say 1969, but it could have been later than that. Because I know that some of the stores that were on Springwood Avenue are not there anymore, because they burned. There was a wonderful pharmacist on the corner of Bridge Avenue and Springwood and he was there for many, many years, and they burned his pharmacy down. They burned one of the churches, one of the Black churches, I don't know. I don't think it was St. Augustine, I think it was Mt. Zion Church. After the riots, we tried to rebuild, and we have never, never come back to the original Asbury Park that was there many years ago. Our police chief, I remember at the time, was Tom Smith; he became our Mayor, and then he went on to become an assemblyman. He lived in my building, thank God for that.

**Ms. West:** You've only lived here in Asbury Park?

**Ms. Rifici:** I have never lived anywhere else except Asbury Park, New Jersey. I have been here all my life. I've seen the things come and the things go and right now we are in a very bad situation, as far as the town is concerned. But I have a feeling, a good feeling, that it is going to get better as the years go on. I hope I am around to see it.

**Ms. West:** Well, you have traveled around Monmouth county, though, I'm sure.

**Ms. Rifici:** Oh, yes, I've been to Freehold many times. In fact, I served on grand juries in Freehold. I've been in New Brunswick many times. I've been in all areas of the town here.

**Ms. West:** How has the county changed?

**Ms. Rifici:** When you go to Freehold, I noticed that the situation there is not as dedicated as it use to be. You were able to go to Freehold at a moment's notice and get what you wanted. But now you have to go through intersections and intersections and intersections before you can get to where you are going.

**Ms. West:** What is in Freehold?

**Ms. Rifici:** Freehold is our County Seat, as far as we are concerned. They have wonderful Freeholders, who are very generous to the city. To our city especially, and the most generous person to our city is assemblymen Tom Smith and his colleague, Steve Corodemus, who is also an assemblyman. They help Asbury Park as much as they can. And I thank them very much for it. I'm glad I'm still living here, and I hope I stay here a few more years.

**Ms. West:** What important historical events have happened in your lifetime?

**Ms. Rifici:** I mentioned the burning of the town. That was really bad. One thing that was very, very nice: we used to have a beautiful parade every year celebrating Columbus Day. We used to have the landing at the Boardwalk in Asbury Park for about forty five years; we had that landing of Columbus coming on his boat and all that. Well, I understand the city decided to cancel it, but there was so much outcry from the people, that they put it back on again. But it is not as well attended as it used to be. We had fireworks going all over the place for years and years and years and that was cancelled also. So the town has been rebuilt and I don't know how they are going to do, but I wish them lots of luck.

**Ms. West:** This landing: did the people wear costumes?

**Ms. Rifici:** Yes, the landing was done by a gentleman called Joseph Palaia and he dressed in the Columbus era suit. He has the sailors all dressed the same in costumes. The Boy Scouts helped. I hope the houses are much better now then they were a few years back. The development has helped a little bit. Some of the homes are in very terrible condition. But now I understand that some of the people are doing a wonderful job of rebuilding their homes. In fact, fortunately, Asbury is beautiful compared to the way it used to be a few years ago. And most of the people who live on Freewood Avenue, who are Black people, have moved toward Fourth, Second, and Third Avenues in Asbury. They have done a beautiful job of keeping their homes up to date.

**Ms. West:** How is the Boardwalk now?

**Ms. Rifici:** The Boardwalk is not too great. We have the Paramount Theatre and we have the Convention Hall, which is operating, but not too great, like they used to be. And the Boardwalk hasn't done too well this year. I know that they have had a lot of trouble at least, I would say, since July of this year. We've had a huge barge anchored off the Convention Hall parked by the landing up by the

Boardwalk to make the land larger than what it is. And so far the people are afraid to go down to the Bay, so there has been no Baying season this year. Otherwise, the Convention Hall is supposed to be repaired, and I hope they repair it soon, because that was one of the most beautiful places in Asbury, as far as skating was concerned. Ice skating, roller-skating was all held there. Some of the wonderful stores that were there for many, many, many years are not there anymore. And I hope one day soon that they will rebuild them.

**Ms. West:** Are there any rides or anything on the Boardwalk now?

**Ms. Rifici:** I think there is one ride. I'm not sure if that's even activated in the summertime like it used to be. They have tried to do something. Trying to bring some of these golf courses back, which I hope they do. They tried to open some of the stores. In fact, this year was the first year that they had vendors on the Boardwalk on Wednesday and a Saturday to help the people to come back to the Boardwalk. I hope they do.

**Ms. West:** Do you have any keepsakes from over the years? From Monmouth County or Asbury Park?

**Ms. Rifici:** Well, I tried to keep pictures of the different developments in Monmouth County: I know that they have developed quite a bit. In fact, the only objections I have that they haven't done, is that they haven't completed Route 18. That's still closed, and it has been going on for forty years. I wish they would hurry up and open it up.

**Ms. West:** What memories do you have of your school days?

**Ms. Rifici:** I had wonderful years in the Bangs Avenue School, which used to be North. We were the North and then the South was where the Black children used to go. Then after a while we decided we would combine them. We start integrating children back and forth. Of course, I left when I was twelve years old because Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic School opened. My mother and parents wanted me to go there, which I did. Had wonderful years in Asbury and at schools. I went to the Adler Park Business College which was situated on the corner of Banks and the Railroad Station, which is now not there anymore. I didn't go to college because I had to help my parents support the other children.

**Ms. West:** What about the classes? Were the classes integrated?

**Ms. Rifici:** No, they were not. There were Black teachers for the Black children. There were white teachers for the white children. They did not get together. They taught on their side and we taught on our side.

**Ms. West:** What about during recess?

**Ms. Rifici:** Recess was separated, too. Then of course, I went to Mt. Carmel School, and that was different. We had Black children and white in the same classes being taught by the nuns.

**Ms. West:** What books do you like to read?

**Ms. Rifici:** I love to read, and my favorite book is, a wonderful book by Thomas Burton. Thomas Burton has a wonderful book out about the different types of religions and how we should help other people of all nationalities, of all races. I love that book. In fact, it was put in the papers the other day, all over again. It's time to revive it again. I think we need a lot of religion in this world today because it is gone. I like biographies and I like the biography of Booker T. Washington, and I think they are wonderful reading for people in this day and age who do not understand what happened many, many, many years ago. And how we got to this point. This is a wonderful era and we are going into the year 2000. I hope that these younger people will understand we went on and helped. They're not doing too much helping, the younger people: they're too busy running around doing other things which are not that important to their lives. I think they should get together and help as much as we can, everybody.

**Ms. West:** Heroine?

**Ms. Rifici:** Well, my heroine was Amelia Earhart. She was a woman flyer, a pioneer. She was attempting to fly solo around the world. Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean communication was lost and her plane disappeared with her many years ago.

**Ms. West:** Any others?

**Ms. Rifici:** Well, I don't have too many heroes. But there were a lot of heroes and heroines. There were so many of them in the World War II.

**Ms. West:** Who influenced you the most in your life?

**Ms. Rifici:** My mother and father, who were of Italian extraction. They didn't take any kind of response from us, as far as answering back. In that time, I didn't think they were doing the right thing, but they did. Because later years proved that they were right, absolutely right, and they guided my life all these years. I didn't get married until I was sixty-seven years old when I married Mr. Rifici. My maiden name is Cesare. I married Mr. Rifici who had been married. He was the brother of Dr. Rifici. Then I started my married life. On top of that I inherited a stepdaughter and a stepson. My stepdaughter had three children; she died young. I



**Julia and her husband,  
Vincent Rifici**

raised three grandchildren up to this date, who are now twenty-five, twenty-four, and twenty-three. At the time of their mother's death, they were sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen. I think I have accomplished a little bit by raising the children. They taught me how teenagers operate, which is a little bit different from the way we operate.

**Ms. West:** Tell us more about your parents.

**Ms. Rifici:** My parents were immigrants. When my father came to New York Harbor he had been working for the Italian government in Italy. When he got here, they would not accept any of the education that he had before. So he became a painter. My mother came a few months later, and they married at Ellis Island. They started their married life together and they raised seven children, and most of them were raised in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

**Ms. West:** What did you do when you got sick in the old days?

**Ms. Rifici:** Well, when you went to a doctor's office many, many years ago, it was not like it is today. Today they tell you to come in a certain hour and there are twenty five people there for the same hour. When you went to the doctor's office before you were the only person there with the doctor. He examined you from head to foot. Never mind working with a computer, he worked with his hands to see where your body ached and did not ache and then he prescribed. At that time, the doctor's visit was two dollars, the medicine was fifty cents. This was the time when everything was done by what the doctor said. Not by what the pharmacist said or anyone else. He gave you a prescription, you went to the drugstore, and you filled it out for a dollar. Now I don't think that is anywhere near what you pay for medicine. The doctors were very human, and made house calls all over the place. Many, many, many years they traveled through Asbury Park and parts of other towns around here, taking care of sick people. Nowadays, you can not get a doctor to do that.

**Ms. West:** What news events stand out in your mind?

**Ms. Rifici:** The newspaper headline that stands most in my mind is Pearl Harbor. Being bombed at Pearl Harbor. All those many, many, many beautiful sailors who died on the Arizona, they went down with their ship. And they bombed Pearl Harbor, the Japanese, and headline was "United States Declares War On Japan." My husband, who served in Japan, became a Sergeant in the United States Army. I had brothers who were with the Air Force, and I had a brother who was involved with communications in Okinawa. We were all filled with the war heroes and the wonderful thing I remember when the war ended were the streets of Asbury and all over Freehold and all over Avon, Bradley Beach, all over the towns here, parades going on for days. Celebrations in the streets, everybody singing, yelling, and screaming, because the war was over and the boys were coming home. I remember that very, very, very distinctly.

**Ms. West:** Do you remember where you were when you got the news about Pearl Harbor?

**Ms. Rifici:** Yes, I was on my way to work. My girlfriend and I were working, we were going to go to work at HL Greens at Asbury Park, which was a 5 & 10 variety store at that time, they called them 5 & 10; now they call them variety stores. As we were going to the street we heard on the radio, not the television, on the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. And I said, "Where the heck is Pearl Harbor? I never have heard of the place!" After that we had all these people who would tell us we couldn't get out of the house at certain hours of the night. We had to go in at six o'clock and pull the dark shades down, because of the bombing they thought would happen. Which, thank God, never did.

**Ms. West:** As a child what were your favorite games?

**Ms. Rifici:** My favorite games were hopscotch and swing the radio and kick the can. We used to kick the can down the street. We used to jump rope and play jacks with a ball. Nowadays they have these wonderful Nintendo. You don't know what is going on with the teenagers, I don't understand the half of them. But we had a very down to earth wonderful place: the playground. We used to have gyms, the school had a beautiful playground, and Mt. Carmel School had another beautiful playground, and all the children mingled. None of this baloney about getting over here, getting over there, "you belong here," "you belong there," that's baloney nowadays.

**Ms. West:** What kind of music did you like?

**Ms. Rifici:** I was a very good dancer and I used to go to a lot of the dances that they had in the different communities. I really liked the Glenn Miller type of music, Tom Dorsey, of course. Many, many, many years the Convention Hall would host Tommy Dorsey Band and Frank Sinatra, who was a skinny little runt, who used to sit on the stage at Convention Hall and sing his heart away. This was many years ago. I remember all that many, many, many years back.

**Ms. West:** You liked Asbury Park?

**Ms. Rifici:** Yes, I did. I had a very enjoyable time at Asbury Park.

**Ms. West:** Do you have any hobbies?

**Ms. Rifici:** I didn't have a chance to have hobbies, because I was too busy taking care of my brothers and sisters. My hobby, I don't know, it was supposed to be going down to the Boardwalk and watching the hurricanes come. We had terrible hurricanes. They took half of the Boardwalk away one time. We would go down

there and watch this come in and, of course, we were down there when the Morro Castle burned. We watched the Morro Castle burn for at least a whole week.

**Ms. West:** What was the Morro Castle?

**Ms. Rifici:** The Morro Castle was a pleasure ship that caught fire. It was being towed to New York Harbor and the lines broke. It parked itself between the Astro Park and Ben's Hole in Mesheddy. It burned there for days. This was after Labor Day and the shore area was closed after Labor Day. It opened up again because this burning Morro Castle was bringing in all these people to see. It was burning for many, many, many days. I think there were 134 lives lost at that time.

**Ms. West:** If you could describe your life as a road map, how would you describe it?

**Ms. Rifici:** I would say kind of ziggy zaggy. (Laughter) I went from there to here to there to here.

**Ms. West:** What advice would you offer young people today?

**Ms. Rifici:** You know nowadays the young people have an idea in mind that they should do one thing and they stick to it. We must be open-minded and flexible as to what we want to do, because maybe what one may think is best may not be. Be a good listener. Learn to think first and then act whenever necessary.

**Ms. West:** Thank you very much for this interview. It has been very interesting.

**Ms. Rifici:** Thank you.