



Interview with Karen Slobodin

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: Alison Lenox
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Holmdel, NJ
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**Karen Slobodin (left) and her
Aunt Edie, present day**

Ms. Lenox: Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I really appreciate it.

Ms. Slobodin: It's my pleasure to do it.

Ms. Lenox: Even though it's all rainy and everything, I feel nice and warm and toasty in your house. So why don't you start at the beginning. You were born in Hightstown, but when did you move to Monmouth County?

Ms. Slobodin: When I was four years old. My parents had lived in Hightstown. They were killed in an automobile accident, so I went to live with my aunt and uncle in Millstone.

Ms. Lenox: Oh no, when you were only four! Oh my gosh, that's devastating.

Ms. Slobodin: It was a pretty traumatic thing.

Ms. Lenox: So you moved to your aunt and uncle's house when you were four. Was this your Mom's sister?

Ms. Slobodin: This is my father's sister. So I grew up in a family with three of their own children, and my younger brother.

Ms. Lenox: Oh, there were two of you.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: What happened when you started going to school? Where did you go to school exactly?



Karen Slobodin, 1944

Ms. Slobodin: Millstone Township had two four-room schools. That was the entire school system. One school was in Clarksburg, and the other was in Perrineville. Since we lived closer to Clarksburg, I went to that school. I actually started when I was four and a half years old, because I could read already.

Ms. Lenox: Oh, you were a fast learner!

Ms. Slobodin: I was very lucky. The county sent a helping teacher to our house to hear me read and make her judgment. She decided that I would be all right, so I went to Clarksburg. The school was set up so that we had kindergarten, first and second grades in one room; third and fourth were in another room; fifth and sixth in another room; and then seventh and eighth were together. They were in a wooden clapboard school that had a bell with a rope hanging down from the belfry. And that was the bell that summoned you to begin classes, and told you when they were over. If you were very, very good, you would get the opportunity to be the person to pull the bell.

Ms. Lenox: That's great. How many students were in your class?



Doctor conducting school physicals

Ms. Slobodin: Not too many. In the whole school there were about fifty-five students, so it was really small. I would say the kindergarten probably had about twelve children. The grades all sat next to each other. So in kindergarten, if you were able to keep up with what the first grade was doing, you could do that. I could read pretty well already, and the rest of the kindergartners had little notebooks that they had to write words in and do flashcards. But I didn't need that. So I would listen in on what the first grade was doing. It was very much like what we have today with

the open classes. This was well before that. We had the one teacher. And discipline was a lot different in those days.

Ms. Lenox: What did they used to call it? There is a word for what you'd call that kind of discipline. Inhumane? (Laughter) Were they allowed to hit you and put you in your place?

Ms. Slobodin: Well, they didn't hit you so much, except with a ruler on your knuckle if you weren't doing something right. But I was a big talker, and I was punished for that very frequently by being put in a closet.

Ms. Lenox: You're kidding!

Ms. Slobodin: I'm not kidding. They had a cloakroom in each room. You would hang your coat and keep your lunch in this room. There were closets in there where they kept supplies. So if you were really bad, they'd stick you in this closet and shut the door. And then you would be in the dark.

Ms. Lenox: For how long?

Ms. Slobodin: I don't know, but it seemed like forever. It was probably like twenty minutes. That was to calm you down so that when you came out, you wouldn't continue talking. That was one punishment. Another one I remember very well, because I thought the last one was fun.

Ms. Lenox: You thought being in a closet was fun?

Ms. Slobodin: The closet had musical instruments like triangles, little oatmeal box drums, and things like that. And I'd be busy! (Laughter) The other punishment was having to sit under the teacher's desk. Yes, you would have to sit on the floor under her desk, and I don't know what the purpose of that was. The desk had an opening on the bottom, so you could peer out and wave at everybody and laugh! (Laughter)

Ms. Lenox: Well, that's a big punishment, too. My goodness.

Ms. Slobodin: But those were the kinds of punishments in those grades. Then you would move up to a different room next door. And there was no indoor plumbing until 1942. We had two outhouses out in the back of the school. One was for the girls, and one was for the boys. The girls' outhouse had two rooms. One had four large holes, and the other one had four small holes. (Laughter) And there wasn't any room for modesty because when we had recess, we'd all get marched out there and we'd line up and four at a time would go in. There was a pump since there was no running water. So you had to have your own little bar of soap and your own little pink cup. I remember I had a collapsible pink cup I would carry to school with me.

Ms. Lenox: Now that was for drinking?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. You would line up at the pump to get water. One person would pump, and you'd all put your little cup underneath. So you had to bring that from home.

Ms. Lenox: How long was the school day?

Ms. Slobodin: I think it was probably like 9:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. I don't remember when we got home. We had a long ride because it was a farm community, and there weren't that many people close together. So you had a long ride. I lived in Smithburg, actually, which is right on the border of Freehold Township, and we had to go all the way to Clarksburg and around where there were a lot of farms. And it was almost in Mercer County. There was a bus, but it picked up a lot of people and took a long time.

Ms. Lenox: So do you have any idea what time you would get on the bus, was it like 7:00 a.m.?

Ms. Slobodin: No, it was probably around 8:00 a.m., or something like that. It would take about an hour to get to school. And we had a safety patrol, and we had the State Troopers come once a month and give safety lectures. When you got older, you had the honor of wearing this brass badge on your arm. And then you'd be in charge of the safety on the bus. That way the bus driver didn't have to bother with keeping us quiet. I remember my older sister was a bus monitor. To keep people quiet, if they wouldn't be still enough, she had a roll of tape she'd use to tape your mouth. Oh yes, they did all kinds of things that are unheard of today!

Ms. Lenox: Absolutely unheard of, yes. Do you think that kind of discipline helped...do you think it stopped kids from acting up?

Ms. Slobodin: No, not really, not that. But I think you could get in serious trouble when you got rapped or a teacher knocked you on your head, which did happen occasionally if you were really bad. But for those of us who were just being mischievous, I don't think it really made any difference. The ones who were really bad were so bad that...(Laughter) There were a few boys who had been kept back. In those days you kept people back if they didn't pass at the end of the year. They were held back more than once, sometimes. So we had in the fifth grade, some boys that were almost fourteen or fifteen years old. They were very big, and they did a lot of mischievous things. There were bullies, too.

Ms. Lenox: Now you said it only went up to eighth grade. Was that all the schooling you got?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh no, they had high school. But to go to high school, you had to go to Allentown High School.

Ms. Lenox: That sounds far.

Ms. Slobodin: It is very far. You don't know. Allentown is near Trenton. Because I lived on the border with Freehold, it really would've been a tremendously long ride. So in my family, all of us went to Freehold High School.

Ms. Lenox: Freehold Borough?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, Freehold Borough. It was just too much to travel to Allentown, and you only had to pay the difference in tuition and you could go to Freehold. And the bus stopped right across the street, so that was like a thirty-minute ride.

Ms. Lenox: That's a lot better, right? Was there indoor plumbing at Freehold High School?

Ms. Slobodin: At the High School they did.

Ms. Lenox: That was a big jump then; you must have been in shock when you went to high school.

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, no. I wasn't, because we got indoor plumbing in the schools in 1942, I think. That was really very luxurious with tiled bathrooms and fountains in the hallway. But we had a lunchroom at that time. Before then, we had to bring our own lunches with a thermos bottle, and all that. You would eat in your class then, right at your desk. Then you would have recess and go out and play. But when we got the plumbing and they had running water in the school, we got a lunchroom. It was through the PTA I think. My mother was the president. And then you could get money from the government for lunch subsidies, because there were a lot of really poor kids in Millstone who lived on farms. So we had a lunchroom in the basement of the school, and there were two women that did the cooking.

Ms. Lenox: I loved my lunch ladies.

Ms. Slobodin: I got overdosed on tomatoes! (Laughter) We grew a lot of tomatoes in Millstone on these farms. My mother, who was President of the PTA, got this idea that all of us could go out and pick tomatoes, and these ladies in the PTA would can them. Then they would be used in making the lunches we would get at school. So we would all go out and pick tomatoes, and then they would be canned. All winter long, we would get tomatoes with macaroni, tomatoes with frankfurters, and tomatoes with you name it. To this day, my brother and sister don't eat tomatoes!

Ms. Lenox: I bet! (Laughter)

Ms. Slobodin: That same lunchroom, which was in the basement, was also used during WWII as a bomb shelter. We used to have air raid warnings...

Ms. Lenox: Yes, I was about to get into the War and how that affected you. So you were still in school at that time?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, yes, I was in school all during the War. The sirens would go off. There was a firehouse across the street, so we'd always hear the sirens very loudly. Then you would go down into the basement in an orderly fashion. And there were sandbags lined up against the walls, and we'd have to crunch down in there so you would be in the right position if something had happened.

Ms. Lenox: And did you really feel in fear of something happening, or did it become so passé that you didn't worry...like a fire drill now in schools? I never paid attention to them.

Ms. Slobodin: Exactly. I never felt fear, not really.

Ms. Lenox: I heard some people talk about the 1950s, and they had those...

Ms. Slobodin: That was different. In the 1950s, that was a nuclear bomb scare. Because of the Cold War, there was a lot more fear in general, I think.

Ms. Lenox: But in 1942 you didn't really feel that...it was overseas and didn't really affect you?

Ms. Slobodin: Right. It was far away. I remember listening to the radio and hearing the crackling reports, you know, on the short-wave radio of what was happening.

Ms. Lenox: I want to talk to you about the War, and how it affected your family, since you brought it up. Did any of your family go and participate in the War? Did your mom or anyone want to? (If someone is listening to this tape: when you refer to your mom and dad now, you really are talking about your aunt and uncle, right?)

Ms. Slobodin: That's right.

Ms. Lenox: And because you were so young, understandably they would take on the role as your parents.

Ms. Slobodin: That's right.

Ms. Lenox: Ok, I just wanted to clear that up. Did your mom work for the War effort or your dad go overseas?

Ms. Slobodin: No, my father, I guess, was too old. He was in his forties. He was an Air Raid Warden. I remember he had a little tin hat, like the kind of helmets that they wore in World War I. Only his was blue, with a triangle on it, and he had

an armband. He had this book where you studied all the silhouettes of enemy planes so that you could spot them. And we had blackouts, and you'd have to have your windows covered at night with something heavy so the light wouldn't shine out. The car headlights were supposed to be dim, not that you could travel that much because we had gas rationing. So you couldn't really go that far anyway. But my dad would go out searching for planes. I don't know exactly why and when he did it, but he did go out. And my older brother, the oldest one, was the only one old enough to go to War. But he was exempt because he had a farm. Farmers were exempt, because they were needed to make the food.

Ms. Lenox: How much older was he than you?

Ms. Slobodin: He was twelve years older than myself.

Ms. Lenox: He had his own farm, or was he working on your dad's farm?

Ms. Slobodin: No, he had his own farm. My dad had a store.

Ms. Lenox: Oh, that's right, you did say that.

Ms. Slobodin: This was very important during the War, too, because we had rationing of a lot of things. We had ration books, and I don't know if you know about them.

Ms. Lenox: No, I don't know what they are.

Ms. Slobodin: Every person was issued a book of coupons.

Ms. Lenox: From the government?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. There was an office in Freehold that distributed them to everyone in the county. Depending on your age, you would get so many stamps for meat, sugar, and gasoline. People had different stamps on their card. A person who needed his car because he did first aid would have an A stamp on his card. Most people had C stamps, which was a lower priority. So you could only get so many gallons of gasoline per month, so that curtailed what you could do. You could only buy so much meat and sugar, believe it or not. And in my dad's store, we would break open the five-pound bags of sugar and would measure it into one-pound bags. So that was one of my jobs.

Ms. Lenox: You worked at the store?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, yes. I did a lot of chores there.

Ms. Lenox: Let's talk about the store now. When did you start working at the store?

Ms. Slobodin: I was seven years old. I could do my arithmetic, so if somebody came in and wanted to buy a candy bar, for example, I could make change very well.

Ms. Lenox: What kind of store was it? It was a general store?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: Describe the store, because I don't think people nowadays understand what a general store is. What kind of things could you get there?

Ms. Slobodin: Everything under the sun from candy bars to women's dresses, to straw hats...

Ms. Lenox: Women's dresses? Wow.

Ms. Slobodin: Even medications, like cough syrup with my dad's name on it.

Ms. Lenox: What was the name of your dad's store?

Ms. Slobodin: It was called the Smithburg General Store. Actually that's the picture of it that my brother drew from a photo. It was built in 1865.



**Sketch of Smithburg
General Store**

Ms. Lenox: Is that a pen drawing?

Ms. Slobodin: It is a pen-and-ink drawing. And the store had gas tanks out in front, and it had a kerosene pump on the porch because a lot of people lit their homes with kerosene. They didn't have electricity. We did have electricity, but not everyone did. We had all the conveniences always, thank God!

Ms. Lenox: Did you have indoor plumbing?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, yes. At home we did. But there were people who didn't. So in a sense it was like living in the nineteenth century because at night you'd go out, and you'd see kerosene lamps burning in people's homes.

Ms. Lenox: Where was the store?

Ms. Slobodin: It was on Route 537. About ten years ago, the county decided to widen the road to Great Adventure. They took that piece of property, and they razed the store. It's gone...it's where the road is. My heart really sank when I went by there the first time.

Ms. Lenox: Did he have a farm as well?

Ms. Slobodin: No. We didn't have a farm. The store was a full-time job, seven days a week from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. And we all worked.

Ms. Lenox: How close were you to the store?

Ms. Slobodin: We were right across the street. And that house is still there. It has a historic plaque on it because it was built during the Revolutionary time. It was actually a stagecoach stop for stagecoaches from Philadelphia to New York.

Ms. Lenox: That's fantastic!

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. It was very old, and it had small rooms with small closets.

Ms. Lenox: So in this store, you sold everything. Then during the War, everything was rationed. Did you have people who did come in and could pay for things?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, yes. My father had a big ledger that he kept accounts in. A lot of people would come in and tell him to "put it on the book." And my father had a lot of people who "put it on the book," and they didn't pay. He'd have to ask them for it then, and a lot of times he didn't get paid back. When he died, there were many, many people who had never paid him back.

Ms. Lenox: But he was a nice guy.

Ms. Slobodin: He was a really nice guy. He was also the mayor of the town.

Ms. Lenox: He was mayor of Smithburg?

Ms. Slobodin: He was mayor of Millstone Township.

Ms. Lenox: How many people were in Millstone when he was mayor?

Ms. Slobodin: Maybe five hundred. It was really small, but the farms were very big. Smithburg had a bar across the street from the store, and then there were a few farms, which were mostly owned by Italian farmers, who raised vegetables on one side of us. And that was considered a town...with the store. Then you'd go to Clarksburg, and there was another general store. They had a firehouse across the street and had a post office in the general store. And then they had the school. So that was another town. Then there were more farms. There were a lot of chicken farms around the Clarksburg area. Then you'd go to Perrineville, and there was another general store. And all of the general stores were owned by my relatives. That seemed to be the way to go.

Ms. Lenox: When did your father become mayor?

Ms. Slobodin: As far as I know, he was the mayor since I started school. It was for a really, really long time. And he was on the Board of Education. And I don't think they do that anymore...it's a little conflict of interest! (Laughter)

Ms. Lenox: But back then it probably was a good idea to have everybody involved in the same thing.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, that's right. It wasn't so big that you had to have a bureaucracy, anyway. But if someone got hurt and they needed to go to the hospital, there was no hospital except in Red Bank or Trenton. You had to go that far. So my dad would take them wherever they needed to go, or to the doctor in Freehold, which was the closest place to go.

Ms. Lenox: So there would be a doctor down the road in Freehold Borough?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. He used to make house calls, by the way. I remember the doctor used to come to our house. My brother invariably got a stomachache after Thanksgiving, and he'd come with his little black bag. He'd shut the door, and you'd hear by brother moaning and groaning in there. But it was a nice time. As far as the migrant workers go, with the store...

Ms. Lenox: They were involved with the store?

Ms. Slobodin: They came from these farms. Generally speaking, they had open-bed trucks where they would all stand in the back, or they had old school buses. The farmers would bring them up from Florida in the summer, well, actually in the spring. Then they would stay through until the end of the fall crop. Shocking as it may seem, all of them had living quarters in barns. I remember we would deliver food to different farms, sometimes. Clayton's Farm, which was a big potato farm right on 537, had a tremendous barn. Downstairs they had all the equipment, the cows, and so forth. And upstairs they had sleeping quarters, which I went up to with my father. They were just separated by blankets, you know, one family from another. And they had kerosene lamps, and that was it. And they worked in the fields all day picking potatoes. The farmers would bring them in at night, and very often they would be covered with dust from the fields. And their little children would be barefoot. And they would come into the store to buy stuff for their supper like chitlins, black-eyed peas, etc. We kept all of those things that we knew they liked. Once a week, they would make a really big shopping expedition to lay in enough staples for the week. So they would come in loads, so we would have maybe fifty people at a time in the store. And we would be rushing around. We'd put all these groceries into a big, cardboard box. Then they would take the whole thing out to the truck and put it in. These gangs were usually led by one person, who was like the leader. And he was like the crew leader, he would organize the crews. And it was really interesting because Saturday night was

their night off. There was a bus in Freehold that would come down to Smithburg. I guess it must have gone to Fort Dix. It was a very busy road because Fort Dix was very active, and that was one way of going there during the War. You'd have a lot of convoys going there then. But on Saturday night, the bus from Freehold would stop in Smithburg in front of the store, and a lot of these people who worked on the crews all day would be all dressed up. They had on perfume, and the women wore fancy dresses and the men wore zoot suits. And they had chains dangling down, and I'm sorry that I didn't take pictures at that time. And I'd sit on our front porch and watch them.

Ms. Lenox: They'd be all decked out and then get on the bus, and then they'd go to where?

Ms. Slobodin: They'd go to Freehold for a night on the town. Freehold was wonderful. That was the big town, and everybody went to Freehold on Saturday night. It was very lively, and there wasn't anything outside of town. And they had two movie theatres right on Main Street.

Ms. Lenox: That's a big deal with two theatres there.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, it was a very big deal. You know where the Hall of Records is? Right next to it is an office building. That was the movie theatre. And that was the nice one, and it was called The Strand Theatre. Everybody went, on either Saturday night or Sunday. We would go in the winter, when it wasn't so busy. We would go on Sunday afternoon, and you would meet everybody else with their families there. So, it was very sociable. There was another movie theatre called Liberty Theatre, and that was where Breech's Mens Store was on Main Street. It was in that area. And that theatre was kind of shady.

Ms. Lenox: It was just a little bit up the street?

Ms. Slobodin: Only a couple of blocks away, but that is where questionable people went with brown paper bags with something in it. So we didn't go there very often, but that was the theatre that had all the Westerns. It had all the serials, like the Charlie Chan movies. So occasionally my mother would relent and let me go.

Ms. Lenox: Maybe you'd be allowed to go on a Saturday afternoon?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, right. Everyone always said it had "bed bugs" and it was not a good place to go. And sure enough, we went there and a few days later I was itching and itching. And we had to go to the doctor. It was a little "seedy." But there were a lot of places to go for ice cream, sodas, and there were bars, of course. The American Hotel was the big thing.

Ms. Lenox: So even back then the American Hotel was around?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, it was very big and fancy then. And there was the race track.

Ms. Lenox: The race track was around then, too?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh yes, that was there too. So the streets were just filled with people visiting.

Ms. Lenox: So they came from all different areas. Obviously you came from Smithburg, and then other people would come from other areas all around Freehold.

Ms. Slobodin: Oh sure, from Colts Neck and Farmingdale. That was it, there was nothing else.

Ms. Lenox: It was just that main street, the main strip.

Ms. Slobodin: That was it, there really wasn't anything else.

Ms. Lenox: Let me just go back to the migrant workers for just one second. I want to clarify where they came from. You say they came from Florida...did they maybe also come from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia?

Ms. Slobodin: It is possible, I don't recall. But I do remember Florida being mentioned. They might have come from North Carolina or Georgia, some of them. I remember in the fall when it would get a little cooler, they would all be wrapped up in sweaters, and we thought it was still pretty warm. You see, they had come from a very warm climate.

Ms. Lenox: Yes, right. Do you think they were all of a particular nationality?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh they were all Blacks...American Blacks. There were no Hispanics coming up then.

Ms. Lenox: African American. That's interesting.

Ms. Slobodin: I think during the winter they worked at the orange groves and what other things were grown down South.

Ms. Lenox: What type of people lived in your area? Were there other African Americans who lived in the area but were not migrant workers?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: Were there Irish people and all different kind of backgrounds?

Ms. Slobodin: Actually, it was very diverse. There was a section in Millstone called Woodsville. That's the road between Smithburg and Manalapan, the back road. And a lot of Black people lived there, and it was like a ghetto in a sense. They had little houses and so on. Then there were little groups here and there. I don't know what they did for a living. I guess they worked on farms or they worked in Freehold, which had the rug mill. There were Blacks, and we had Black people in my school. There were not a lot, but there were some. When I look back on it now, it was pretty diverse in Smithburg. We are Russian Jewish, and the guy that owned the bar was Hungarian. The farmers immediately around us were all Italian immigrants who spoke with accents. There were a lot of immigrants. You know it never dawned on me until lately, when I have been thinking about it. There were a lot of immigrants! And then there were those who had been there forever, it seemed. Most of those people lived on Siloam Road. There were poor whites, not educated, and a lot of them were drunks. I remember seeing this one particular person, and he was middle-aged then. He always would go to the bar and get a bottle, and he would sit on our store's front porch with a bag over the bottle and drink and sing with all his cronies. And they were all having a good time. Then somebody would say, "Your mother's coming." And his mother would be coming down the road with a broom, to get after him!

Ms. Lenox: To get a middle-aged man?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. And then he would go. But it really happened. On Saturday night, the bar in Smithburg was pretty lively too. You could hear people singing, and they always played the western, cowboy music like "Back in the Saddle Again." We didn't have air conditioning and it was hot, so you had your windows open and you heard everything that was going on.



The Smithburg Hotel

Ms. Lenox: You were talking about having a good time on Saturday night. As a kid growing up, you got to go to the movies. But was there anything else you got to do? Did you have friends? With them all being on different farms, it must have been hard to get together.

Ms. Slobodin: It was very difficult.

Ms. Lenox: But you had siblings...a younger brother and an older...

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, but it's not the same thing. They were older. There is a four-year difference between all of us, and they were in different groups.

Ms. Lenox: They didn't want to play with you.

Ms. Slobodin: They didn't want to play with me. They would say, "Get away, kid." I did have some friends, but it was difficult to get together because you couldn't ride your bicycle that far. I was allowed to ride maybe three or four miles, but no further than that. Occasionally one of my friend's parents would bring their child over, and we would play. Or I would go to their house. But mainly you didn't see that many people. So I did a lot of reading during the summer.

Ms. Lenox: Did you listen to the radio?

Ms. Slobodin: I listened to the radio a lot...all those old programs like *Green Hornet* and *Tom Mix*, etc.

Ms. Lenox: Was it like they portray it in the movies and things where the whole family sits around the radio and listens together?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: Was Jack Benny on the radio?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: You listened to Jack Benny on the radio.

Ms. Slobodin: The whole family would listen to Jack Benny and Fred Allen and his wife, Gracie. And there were a lot of musical programs. I liked Colonel McCormick from Chicago, and that had a theatre on Saturday night with all the operettas like the *Student Prince* and all the Romburg things. I knew them all. And there was Lux Radio Theatre on Monday nights with wonderful voices. Oh, I just loved it.

Ms. Lenox: So that was neat. You'd get to sit around the radio, and then you said that you read a lot. What kind of reading did you do? What was your favorite book back then?

Ms. Slobodin: Well, I liked Nancy Drew.

Ms. Lenox: Really! I love Nancy Drew. (Laughter) I thought it was only in my generation. Oh, wow!

Ms. Slobodin: She has been around forever.

Ms. Lenox: She certainly has.

Ms. Slobodin: And then there were the Bobbsey Twins, and they had a lot of adventures. There was *The Bobbsey Twins at the Seashore*, *The Bobbsey Twins at the Mountains*, and all those.

Ms. Lenox: Where did you get these books? At the library?

Ms. Slobodin: The library. Oh this is another interesting thing. I'm glad you brought that up. There was a library in Freehold...the County Library, which was the house on the corner of Broad Street and Manalapan Avenue.

Ms. Lenox: Is that where the library was? I always thought there used to be a library there...there is like a sign that said that or something. But I never quite understood this.

Ms. Slobodin: It was the first County Library, and it was just that one little house. But I thought it had a lot of books. They had a children's room. We went there occasionally, but what they did was to have a bookmobile that went out into rural areas. It would stop in Smithburg, and you could go onto this bookmobile. They had shelves of children's books, and they had books for adults, too. You would pick out what you wanted, and they would return in two weeks and pick up the books you read, and you could get some others. So that was a really good service!

Ms. Lenox: That's great.

Ms. Slobodin: It was, because they went to Smithburg and Clarksburg, and all these places. So it helped a lot.

Ms. Lenox: You became older then, and did you stay in the area? Have you stayed in this area your whole life?

Ms. Slobodin: I went away to college.

Ms. Lenox: You did? Where did you go?

Ms. Slobodin: Douglass College.

Ms. Lenox: So did I! What kind of degree did you get?

Ms. Slobodin: I got a degree in Political Science. I was a bookworm. And I worked at Princeton University as a research assistant for a couple of years. Then I got married. Of course in the 1950s, you didn't think about having a career that much after you got married. I got pregnant right away, and I had three children. We moved to Holmdel several years after we were married...to this house. And we just stayed in this house ever since. My husband is from New York, but he loved the country, so we just stayed here.

Ms. Lenox: So how long have you been here in Holmdel?

Ms. Slobodin: Forty-three years.

Ms. Lenox: Forty-three years in this house. That's fantastic!

Ms. Slobodin: It is unbelievable. It has been a very stable existence.

Ms. Lenox: Yes, it is, because nowadays it is very transient. People don't stay in their houses more than about five years or something like that.

Ms. Slobodin: That's really true. There are a few of us left, but most people who were here have moved. And there are a lot of new people now. So we don't have to move to get a new environment...everybody around us is new!

Ms. Lenox: That's right, they all come to your environment and change it! (Laughter) What do you think was the most significant thing that happened within your lifetime...growing up in Monmouth County? Well, you had automobiles at that time, is that correct?

Ms. Slobodin: We did, but there were still a few people who had a horse and wagons, believe it or not. In fact I can show you a picture. I told you I had published some stuff. There's a nostalgia magazine.

Ms. Lenox: So you had written an article in a magazine called "Good Old Days."

Ms. Slobodin: Actually what I would consider most monumental in terms of changing things, was the appearance of the supermarkets. It changed your whole way of life. You see, you take it for granted that you just go to the supermarket and buy everything. And you either write a check, pay cash, or whatever. There is no such thing now as saying, "put it on the book." It was a very personalized kind of business, the old general store. All of the stores were back then, because you knew the people individually and you could help them out if you knew they were having a hard time. It made it more of a life experience rather than just going shopping. You knew the people in the store as friends, and you knew what was going on in their lives.

Ms. Lenox: Right, like, "How is Martha? How is she doing now?" or something like that. You had a personal conversation with them. Where was the first supermarket?

Ms. Slobodin: In Freehold...I think it was Food Town or ShopRite. The Norkus brothers...I don't know if that means anything to you.

Ms. Lenox: Norkus Food Town. I think Norkus Corporation is Food Town.

Ms. Slobodin: They were the first one. When they opened up, a lot of the people started going there. It was so big and shiny and new, and of course our store was old and dusty.

Ms. Lenox: But that was kind of far for people, though. It was downtown, right?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. But by then, after the War, you had gas again and most people got cars. The horses and wagons faded out. And I think it changed a whole way of life because people started traveling more and moving. Of course nothing happened in Smithburg for years and years. It stayed the same basically. But now if you ever go out there, they have million dollar homes out there. And it's a very fancy place to live, and you don't see a lot of these old timers. Probably none at all anymore. But I think the supermarkets changed something very radically. My uncles who had all these general stores, they were all immigrants...uneducated as far as having an American education. But they had the opportunity then to have a business with these general stores. But that disappeared.

Ms. Lenox: How long after the supermarket came into being in Freehold do you think was the demise of your dad's store? Was it a long period of time?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, it took awhile. My dad died in 1971, and my brother continued the store. But it was going downhill. They were trying to keep up. Actually my brother and brother-in-law kept the store up. They started getting televisions in the store, and then they would have to install it. Things change because you have to keep up or compete with what is going on.

Ms. Lenox: So they adjusted what they were doing.

Ms. Slobodin: It got to the point where most people just stopped to get gas or buy a pack of cigarettes. They didn't do their weekly shopping there anymore. They went to town, because the prices were lower. That was the big thing...you couldn't compete with a big store as far as prices go.

Ms. Lenox: And the whole idea of personal service went out the window. Nobody really cared about it anymore.

Ms. Slobodin: Absolutely.

Ms. Lenox: I know that is one of the things I really miss. I go to a "inky-dinky" bank on 537 because people know me there! And I like that. And I think it's just not around anymore.

Ms. Slobodin: No, not at all. Everything is so impersonal that you miss another dimension, I think. It's too bad. And the people who come after you, they won't even know to miss it. That's just the way it is. But to me, that really was the beginning of the end of the old-time country living.

Ms. Lenox: Smithburg, to me, doesn't even seem like a town! Isn't it that intersection? (Laughter) Is that the town? Is that where the town was?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. It is nothing.

Ms. Lenox: My mom always says, "That's Smithburg," and I say, "Where?" (Laughter) When did it all of a sudden not become the town? Do you remember that? Is it a town to you when you go by it?

Ms. Slobodin: There had been a nursery out on one of the side roads. They bought some of the farm land in Smithburg, and the people who had the farms moved out. Then some other farm equipment place bought some more property. The people just changed, too. They weren't the people you had known your entire life. There had been a lumber mill about half-a-mile down the road that people came to, and that was gone. And the bar was then owned by somebody I didn't know. Then the same migrant workers weren't coming up like they did before to work. Hispanics were coming in. Farms were not growing potatoes like they used to. They were growing other things then, and a lot of Hispanics started to kind of replace the Black workers, but they didn't come in the trucks that they used to. They were imported from Puerto Rico or Mexico and flown in, I guess.

Ms. Lenox: And did they stay here instead of going away?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. Then Freehold started to change because there is a big Hispanic section.

Ms. Lenox: So when do you think that started happening? I thought it was within my lifetime. I thought the Hispanic population started happening when I was in my twenties, and I am in my thirties now.

Ms. Slobodin: No, it was earlier. As a matter of fact, we even had a Hispanic fellow working for us in our store. He came with his family. I guess a lot of them came to Lakewood, that whole area in between. There were a lot of poultry farms. And for some reason I think they were working more on the poultry farms, but I don't know why. But it was earlier than when you were in your twenties.

Ms. Lenox: Right, it sounds like it.

Ms. Slobodin: Probably in the 1950s. But imperceptibly, the farmers sold out. Levitt, the builder, was another big thing, with the tract housing.

Ms. Lenox: That was in the 1970s?

Ms. Slobodin: No, it was in the 1960s. When we moved to Holmdel, Matawan was a quiet, little one-horse town. And then Levitt started to build Strathmore, which is a really, really big development. There are thousands of homes there. And that started in the 1960s. And then it just grew and grew, and all the New Yorkers started coming in.

Ms. Lenox: So the whole Levitt boom was a big thing. And I think Hovnanian is today's Levitt. What was your take on that? What was your feeling at that time?

Ms. Slobodin: I was happy, I really was. There would be more people, and maybe we would get some interesting stores and things to go to. Having been brought up in fairly isolated circumstances, I loved to be with people and be able to do things.

Ms. Lenox: So you thought it was going to bring a lot more to the area?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, and it did. Of course now we are at the other extreme. There is so much traffic and congestion. I don't like that. But at the time, I didn't think it was bad. And people could afford to buy their own homes. Do you know how much one of those homes cost back then? Ten thousand dollars! Can you believe it?

Ms. Lenox: But that was lot of money at the time, right?

Ms. Slobodin: I guess, because you have to consider inflation. But it's still modest percentage-wise.

Ms. Lenox: Was this house affordable for you?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, yes. We paid eighteen thousand dollars. You can't even buy a car for that now!

Ms. Lenox: That's great. No you can't buy anything for that now! (laughter)

Ms. Slobodin: So I thought that was good. And Brookdale College opened up, and I thought that was wonderful.

Ms. Lenox: When did that happen?

Ms. Slobodin: That happened in 1969. I worked at Brookdale for many years. So I have seen it change, too. It was a wonderful thing for the county to have it. It brought in a lot of interesting speakers and opportunities for people to take courses, and so on.

Ms. Lenox: You had said you went to Rutgers University. Douglass College is part of Rutgers University, right?

Ms. Slobodin: Actually, I was right on the cusp. Until the year that I graduated, it was known as New Jersey College for Women. The year that I graduated, they had planned to switch it to Douglass, after the first Dean. So I was the first graduating class from Douglass. It was part of Rutgers, but not like it is now. It was a very loose affiliation, I think. And today it is much tighter.

Ms. Lenox: Was this the only school to go to?

Ms. Slobodin: Oh, no. I had options. I was accepted at Barnard in New York, but they didn't have housing. It was very tight housing in those days, so I didn't go there. There were a lot of schools.

Ms. Lenox: Did you go to Rutgers to be near your family? Because it wasn't that far away.

Ms. Slobodin: I wanted to go away! (Laughter) I did not want to be near home.

Ms. Lenox: Well, I went to Rutgers, and it was far enough away for me, yet close enough at the same time.

Ms. Slobodin: Exactly. I could come home if I wanted to, but I didn't come home that often. There were a lot of things happening.

Ms. Lenox: You said something about Brookdale coming in 1969. Was that a big deal?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, it was a very big deal for the whole area. It had been a horse farm; Thompson's Horse Farm. I could talk about that, if you want me to.

Ms. Lenox: Yes, I love you to.

Ms. Slobodin: When it opened in 1969, they still had the barns that they were using as classrooms and for administration. Barns! In fact, I started taking some classes there. My children were still little. I went to take a class in one of the horse barns, and it had stalls. Of course they were all cleaned up. But one of the stalls was like a little eating place. They had benches you could sit on. But the classrooms were just screened off areas in this big, open barn. And it was a very, very rural feeling. There was a corn crib in the middle, and there were just two buildings. Do you know where the Creative Arts Center is at Brookdale? The white one. It was one of the original barns, and the other barn was torn down when they built the new Administration Building. But it was very small, and it was very cozy. The president was from California, and full of radical ideas. He would appear in these stalls every week to talk to the students, and everybody could come and talk about whatever was on their mind. And you knew everyone. Of course most of the teachers were like hippies. They were very liberal, and they believed in keeping everything "open" so you didn't have any walls. Anybody who said they wanted a wall was considered an "elitist"...a dirty word.

Ms. Lenox: And what kind of classes did you take?

Ms. Slobodin: I took a class in Black History, because that was very big then in the 1960s. And it was very, very interesting to me. Then I took a journalism

course. But then I started working there in the Reading Department, and I went back to school and got my masters. And then I taught there.

Ms. Lenox: Oh really. Your masters in what?

Ms. Slobodin: Reading Specialist. Brookdale had a Reading and Study Skills Department, and it had an open enrollment. So students who were not very good in high school didn't always succeed when they got there. In the beginning it was voluntary. You could come in for help if you needed it, with your other courses. But then it became mandatory to take a test. If you couldn't pass the reading, writing and math skills, then you had to take certain courses to build up your skills. So that's what I did. It was really interesting. I liked it.

Ms. Lenox: And how long did you do that?

Ms. Slobodin: For twenty years.

Ms. Lenox: My goodness. Twenty years at Brookdale?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: That's great. When did you finish there, what year?

Ms. Slobodin: 1991 or 1992 I think. It's kind of fading away now. (Laughter) But I still go over there a lot. There a lot of things going on like talks, movies, bus trips, etc.

Ms. Lenox: Yes, they have a lot of things going on. And I think it has been really amazing for the community.

Ms. Slobodin: It is necessary now. You have to have a place for young people, or even old people, to go.

Ms. Lenox: Monmouth University, I think it's now called...used to be Monmouth College. When did that come into existence?

Ms. Slobodin: Monmouth was a junior college and wasn't affiliated with anything, I think. It was a junior college when we moved here. It was a two-year school, and then it became a four-year school.

Ms. Lenox: Was it here before Brookdale?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, before Brookdale. Actually it was from at least the 1940s, or maybe even earlier. Then they enlarged, and it became a four-year school. Then it became Monmouth College, and before that it was Monmouth Junior College.

Then it became Monmouth University in the last few years. Once a month, a music teacher would come.

Ms. Lenox: Where are we talking about?

Ms. Slobodin: When I was in grammar school. We had a visiting music teacher who would come once a month. She would play the piano, and we would learn new songs. And in between her visits, our teachers could play the piano and we would have weekly assemblies. Because you had the four rooms, the seventh and eighth grades, and the fifth and sixth grades were back-to-back. They had folding doors between them. You opened those doors, and the whole school would come in for the assembly. So different people got to play the piano. Sometimes the teacher would play and we would all sing, or sometimes students would play. I did this sometimes. We had all these old songs from the songbook like "Old Black Joe" and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," etc. They were really old songs. And people are always amazed that I know all these songs, but we learned them in school.

Ms. Lenox: And that was something that everybody learned. It was just part of the program, and you didn't even think about it.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: Now everybody says you have to offer music lessons and this and that in schools. But it was so well-rounded back then, it sounds like. You got a little bit of everything.

Ms. Slobodin: We did. Actually we got a really excellent education there. The teachers were very knowledgeable in everything. We read a lot and had a lot of homework. And that was that.

Ms. Lenox: People complain so much now that kids have too much homework. What do you think?

Ms. Slobodin: I think it's good to have homework. I don't like mindless homework, but it's a good idea to learn how to do things on your own.

Ms. Lenox: You have the responsibility that you have something to do, and you bring it in the next day.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes. So we'd have these assemblies, and it was long before the Supreme Court made any rulings about prayer in the schools and keeping religion out of the schools. So we all sang Christmas songs and had a Christmas play, and nobody ever complained about anything. You just did it.

Ms. Lenox: You say you are Russian Jewish. Did you practice your Jewish religion? Did you practice Hebrew?

Ms. Slobodin: We kept our Jewish holidays at home. But because the store was open seven days per week, we didn't really do anything. When I was in high school, I wanted to go to Sunday School and find out more. But that was long after the fact. We knew we were Jewish.

Ms. Lenox: But you didn't feel different from everybody else. Everyone was the same...you all learned the Christmas songs and did it all together.

Ms. Slobodin: That's right. I never really thought about it. I never heard my parents complain that we were learning Christmas songs. It was just something you did, and I love them even to this day.

Ms. Lenox: But it didn't take away from your own religion.

Ms. Slobodin: No, not at all. That's why I could never understand a lot of the dissension today about it. I just thought it was fun. We would decorate a Christmas tree in school and make paper chains and all that.

Ms. Lenox: But you didn't have a Christmas tree at home?

Ms. Slobodin: No.

Ms. Lenox: And you did Hanukkah at home.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: Did you have a lot of families in the area that were Jewish?

Ms. Slobodin: There were a few, but I won't say a lot. But there were quite a few.

Ms. Lenox: In school they didn't celebrate any Jewish holidays, did they?

Ms. Slobodin: No. Hanukkah wasn't a big deal in those days. It was just something you did at home. It was after World War II that it started to become more popularized and commercialized with all the gift-giving and everything. But people didn't talk about that then.

Ms. Lenox: From what college did you get your masters degree?

Ms. Slobodin: Monmouth University. I started at Kean, but it was too much of a ride after work.

Ms. Lenox: Where did you work?

Ms. Slobodin: At Brookdale.

Ms. Lenox: So you worked at Brookdale and at night you would get your masters degree.

Ms. Slobodin: Yes.

Ms. Lenox: And then you went back to Brookdale as an instructor.

Ms. Slobodin: Well, things were changing. When I began working there, all you needed was a bachelor's degree to teach. Then they started tightening up, and you had to have a masters degree, but it could be in anything. Then they said you had to have a masters degree in the subject which you were teaching. So I saw the handwriting on the wall, and I decided I needed a reading degree. So that's what I did.

Ms. Lenox: Did you ever think of moving out of the area?

Ms. Slobodin: Yes, I did. But my husband loves it here! (laughter) So I'm stuck. Actually I love New York, but I don't know if I'd want to live there all the time. But I do love to go there.

Ms. Lenox: And do you go into New York a lot?

Ms. Slobodin: Fairly often. I have a daughter who lives in New York, and I go in to see plays and museums fairly often.

Ms. Lenox: Thank you very much, Karen.

Ms. Slobodin: You are welcome, I enjoyed it.