



## Interview with G. Lester Whitfield

Under the Auspices of the  
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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**Ms. Higgins:** Lester, I'm so glad we could get together and talk today.

**Mr. Whitfield:** I'm glad to be here.

**Ms. Higgins:** How did you end up in Monmouth County? When did your family come, and what town were you born in?



**G. Lester Whitfield**

**Mr. Whitfield:** I was born in my parent's house, in Eatontown, 192 Broad Street. The house is still in the family. My nephew now owns it. We sold it to him after my father died. And my father was born in Newark in 1895. My mother was born in West Orange in 1893, and my mom died in 1970. My father died in 1981.

**Ms. Higgins:** Tell us about your memories of growing up in Eatontown.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, I remember when I grew up in Eatontown, it was a very small town. In fact, the population decreased from the 1930 to the 1940 census, as I recall. I was growing up then, and I was interested in things like that. My dad was Vice President of the former First National Bank of Eatontown, which became part of Allenhurst National Bank then Central Jersey Bank, and when he retired he was Vice-President of Central Jersey Bank.

**Ms. Higgins:** You didn't follow the family into banking?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No. I can remember somebody talking to my father one time, and he said, "I suppose you are going to bring your son into the bank." My father said, "Over my dead body." But I was always interested in trains. My father, previous to moving to Eatontown, worked very briefly for Lehigh Valley Railroad. In fact, we didn't own a car until 1930, so we went everywhere by public transportation. We usually took the bus to Red Bank, or the train from Eatontown, or the train from Red Bank, and go to Newark to see my grandparents . My mom's parents lived in Newark. My grandfather Whitfield moved down to Eatontown in 1923, shortly after my parents. He was the first borough clerk when Eatontown became a borough from Eatontown Township. He served until 1938. He died in 1939. Andrew Becker succeeded him as borough clerk.

**Ms. Higgins:** Does the Whitfield Building in Red Bank have anything to do with your family?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Not that I know of. Maybe eons back, you know, we're all cousins somehow or other.

**Ms. Higgins:** One of the things people keep recommending is improvements in transportation. Is it true you used to be able to get to Sandy Hook on a train or a trolley?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The trains came from Long Branch along the shores of Sea Bright and Monmouth Beach. They stopped at Highlands Beach Station, across the bridge at Highlands, and went up through Atlantic Highlands, and all the way to Matawan. That railroad was during the early years. The railroad had to maintain a line along the seawall. This was back in the days when they thought the railroads were rich and everybody else was poor. And the railroad asked for help to maintain the seawall of the North Beach, Sea Bright, and the Interstates. And they said, "No that's railroad property; you take care of it." So the railroad got washed out in a big storm in 1945 and was abandoned in December 1945. Interestingly enough, when they rebuilt the seawall, they put some track back to rebuild the wall. They've unloaded freight cars of stone right on the wall, without having to transport them by truck.

**Ms. Higgins:** Was the bridge there by Bahrs the old railroad bridge? When did that come out?

**Mr. Whitfield:** In 1949, when they closed down Fort Hancock, it was removed except for some pilings still there.

**Ms. Higgins:** Could you once get all the way out to Fort Hancock by train ?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Originally, the railroad ran out to a place called Horseshoe Cove. And when the Army made it the proving ground, the railroad built the track from Highland Beach to Atlantic Highlands in 1892. They moved the proving ground

down to Aberdeen, Maryland some years later. They built a bridge across the Shrewsbury River from Highland Beach to Highlands and below the Scenic Drive to Atlantic Highlands.

**Ms. Higgins:** So Fort Hancock was the predecessor of Aberdeen?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes, it was the proving ground in Fort Hancock before Aberdeen, Maryland.

**Ms. Higgins:** When did Earle get into this picture?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Earle wasn't built until World War II. In fact, I was in the service by then. I went to work for the railroad in 1940. Then I worked for the railroad until 1944, and then I was inducted into the service, shipped to Shepherd Field, Texas. Here I'm in the Air Force and I wanted to work in the railroad. But that's another story.

**Ms. Higgins:** We'll get to that, too. But I can't envision these tracks running through Sea Bright; where were they?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Actually on the North Beach where that path is now. That was the railroad right-of-way. The Sea Bright station was where the highway bridge from Rumson is; they tore it down to build the bridge. Where the 7-Eleven is in downtown Sea Bright, where you have the diagonal, that was a grade crossing and the railroad went west of Ocean Avenue, down through Lowmoor, back of the Old Coast Guard Station at Galilee, where the railroad had a freight station there, and a telegraph operator there years before my time, and then Monmouth Beach came, and now, the present Ocean Boulevard, Atlantic Avenue from North Long Branch down to around Monmouth Medical Center is the right-of-way. When they took the tracks up is when they built a road there. It connected with the present North Jersey Coast Line at West End.

**Ms. Higgins:** Please tell us about the trolley.

**Mr. Whitfield:** The company was called the Jersey Central Traction. The late Judge Labrecque, who was a good friend of mine, just passed away in September. His father was a superintendent on that line, and that's how my friend got to Monmouth County. I used to tease him: I'd say, "I'm a native of Monmouth County and you're an immigrant." His father came to help build that trolley line that ran from Perth Amboy down to South Amboy, on its own bridge across the Raritan River, down through South Amboy and Sayreville, into Union Beach, Keansburg and Campbell's Junction at Belford. They had two lines from Campbell's Junction. One branch went to Red Bank, and it passed past what is now Middletown North High School, and came out roughly parallel to Route 35 to Red Bank. And then the other line came down along Valley Drive and got to Atlantic Highlands. Then it went on a piece of the old Central Railroad on the

Stone Church Branch that they had leased, and passed Stone Church, and came up Valley Drive to Route 36 in the Highlands. It made a right turn at Portland Road, and then they terminated on the Portland Road section, up on top of the hill. I have a picture of the people walking down the hill to get to walk across the bridge to the Highland Beach.

**Ms. Higgins:** What were the years for the trolley?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The Jersey Central Traction was abandoned in 1923.

**Ms. Higgins:** Why?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, everybody thought they needed automobiles. Nobody wanted to ride the trolley. Monmouth County was very sparsely populated. And the roads started to improve, and then of course everybody thinks of the car, I suppose. I don't know, I was just a baby then. I don't remember that. But the right-of-way was pretty well available and viewable until several years ago, when they started widening the roads. I can recall one time walking along and seeing the ties of the trolley tracks along Valley Drive up around close to where it comes out to Route 36 now. But they took that piece of right-of-way out when they built the present bridge and widened Route 36 in Highlands.

**Ms. Higgins:** I interviewed a lady from Union Beach whose mother used to take the trolley to work at the Eisner Factory in Red Bank.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Some of the cars had different schedules. Sometimes a car would go through at Campbell's Junction, change to go to the Highlands. Other times it would change to go to Red Bank. Depending on what time of the year it was I suppose; I don't know.

**Ms. Higgins:** If we just had that now, it would be so much more pleasant on the road, wouldn't it? You said you were able to move around the county pretty readily on the trains.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Oh, yes, the railroad ran from Bay Head to New York and was the New York and Long Branch, which was a joint operation of the Central Railroad of New Jersey and the Pennsylvania Railroad and is now the North Jersey Coast Line. It's now electrified from Long Branch all the way into New York. South of Long Branch is still diesel operated, of course; in those old days it was steam. They had several branches: one branch ran from Freehold to Matawan. It was called the Freehold and New York Railroad; it became part of the Central Railroad. That was always Central Railroad of New Jersey, as well as the Seashore Branch between West End (Long Branch) and Matawan.

**Ms. Higgins:** Where were those tracks?

**Mr. Whitfield:** They ran up through Marlboro.

**Ms. Higgins:** Are they there now?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes, they're covered by weeds and stuff, and some people want to make that a hiking trail, but I believe they should save it for transportation because you're going to need it.

**Ms. Higgins:** Are you in favor of that?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I'm in favor of any trains.

**Ms. Higgins:** I am too.

**Mr. Whitfield:** For instance, when you go to New York. If you go on a bus, you get stuck in the same tunnel that everybody else does. And more people get hit by buses on highways than they do by trains. Look at the accident rate on Route 9. People get to jumping over that wall, and they have to put fences up, so they don't jump over the wall. And one of the problems is that the United States isn't pedestrian friendly. If you want to cross Route 9, you have to walk half a mile. Half a mile is no problem at all in a car, but it's a problem if you are on foot. And if you're an older person carrying bags and groceries across the highway, you can't do it.

**Ms. Higgins:** We used to go down to the train station when we first came to Monmouth County in 1955 to pick up my husband. Our little boy, he was about two or three, wondered if Daddy would come on a diesel or a puffy. When did the puffies go out?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The last scheduled steam engine was in 1957; it was the Pennsylvania Locomotive, because the Central Railroad had already found out it was more economical to run diesels. And of course, they became bankrupt, but they bought the diesels to try to save the operation because it was cheaper. It was less labor intensive, and labor is your big cost at any operation. People get paid and they got to eat. So they dieselized, and then they used the diesels for both passenger and freight. So they'd run a passenger train during the rush hours, then they'd use them for freight service during the day, and so they saved money that way. When you had a steam engine, you had to put it in the round house, and clean the fires, and have to have ICC inspections, and that takes a lot of labor. For example, when the engine would get to Jersey City on the Central at a big roundhouse. In fact, the roundhouse in Jersey City was right where the Liberty Science Center is today. It's built right beside of the Old Central engine house. Finally, the state began to realize that they couldn't build enough roads to handle all the cars, and then started what they call "subsidizing the railroad." But I like to think they should've invested in the railroad just as much as they invest in an airport. It's really interesting to see that they invest in the airports, they invest

in the highways, but they subsidized the railroads. That's what's wrong with America. England and European countries consider railroads a very vital part of transportation. Of course, distances are a lot shorter.

**Ms. Higgins:** Just driving over here, I heard a news broadcast that said with the higher speed of Amtrak trains, some of the New York bus drivers said, "We can't get the school bus across the tracks in the twenty seconds time there is warning." So New York State's reply to that was to use a small bus.

**Mr. Whitfield:** The list of suggestions eliminate crossings, and of course, whatever you can. We had several unfortunate incidents when I was working in railroad. One time, the school bus went across right in front of one of our trains at Union Beach, and the crew saw it. And they said they could see the kid with his hands against the windows, terrified. The driver just ignored it.

**Ms. Higgins:** The bus driver?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The bus driver went right through the red lights. That's the trouble with traffic lights on the highway. People go right by red lights all the time, and that's part of the reason we have road rage; but that's another story.

**Ms. Higgins:** But Conrail is no longer Conrail.

**Mr. Whitfield:** That's right. Just about a year and a half ago now; it was taken over by the Chessie System (CSX) and the Norfolk Southern. This was a model for merging railroads. Chessie's System basically was the Railroads to Florida: the Seaboard Airline, and the Atlantic Coastline, and the Chesapeake Ohio and B&O and the Western Maryland.

**Ms. Higgins:** Was that good for Monmouth County that CSX was taking it over?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, both the CSX and the Norfolk Southern had some bugs. I understand now, what they've done for Monmouth County. Norfolk Southern was the Norfolk and Western Railroad. It took over the Nickel Plate, and it took over part of the Southern Railway. They both wanted to buy Conrail for the access to New York. So what they've done, they've sort of split up the territory. Chessie is mainly responsible for the old New York Central Line up to New York State, Syracuse, and like that, and the Norfolk Southern has the old Pennsylvania line from Pittsburgh into New York that way.

**Ms. Higgins:** Does that take you out to Philly?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes, that's right. But in the New York/Metropolitan area they have what they call joint assets which was sort of a Shortline still called Conrail, to take care both railroads have access to Monmouth County and further up from the Middlesex County, Port of New York, and so forth and so on.

**Ms. Higgins:** I wanted to take the train a while ago to go into New York to keep an appointment, and I'm always very good about leaving myself plenty of time, because I know parking is tight. I drove around for half an hour looking for a place to park. It was a nice day-- I had no problem with walking a mile to the train station, but still I could not find a single, legal place to park within a mile of the train station. That's got to be resolved before I'm going to get back on the train.

**Mr. Whitfield:** They were talking about building a parking garage in Middletown, but people say they don't want the traffic coming to the railroad station. You have what people call "nimbys."

**Ms. Higgins:** What's a "nimby?"

**Mr. Whitfield:** Not in my backyard. (Laughter) Freeholder Larrison said at a meeting where people were complaining about the ferry, "When I became a Freeholder, Monmouth County had 200,000 people. Now it has over 600,000."

**Ms. Higgins:** What's your opinion of the ferry service?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I think anything that deals with public transportation is good, because you can't handle the automobiles. I've been on a senior citizens bus trip for example: we have been to dinner theaters up off of Route 287 and so forth. Come down Route 287 on a bus at four o'clock in the afternoon, and in a bus you're up high. I look at the cars going by. Ninety percent of the cars had one passenger, and that's very inefficient, and of course they say, "Widen the road." I remember when they widened the Parkway to dualize the Parkway each way from South Amboy to Eatontown or Asbury Park actually. And the first thing that happened was all of a sudden we get more traffic and more congestion, so it's just as bad now. People are complaining about the E-Z Pass. My opinion of that is, people who use the parkway should pay their way, but not general taxpayers, and a good percentage of the parkway traffic is going to Atlantic City. These travelers are out-of-staters.

**Ms. Higgins:** They travel through Monmouth County. When we came down in 1955, Route 36 was a sleepy two-lane highway. How did you happen to come from Eatontown to Highlands? Was that your next stop, or did you stop somewhere in between?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, I went in the army. When I went in the army, I was working at the Lakehurst Station as a telegraph operator, and because I was working for the railroad company, I was deferred for a little while, because of the importance of it. But finally, the war was getting heavy and they drafted us, and it so happened that they put me in the Air Force, which I thought was kind of weird, because I worked for the railroad. But they said, "The Air Force is tradition." But I'm glad they did, because that's how I met my wife.

**Ms. Higgins:** Where?

**Mr. Whitfield:** In Louisiana, and if I hadn't been there, if I'd been in the railroad, I would've never met her, so that's a good thing. We've been married fifty-five years.

**Ms. Higgins:** How did you meet your wife?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I went to church. We got married on June 7, 1945 in The First Methodist Church of Alexandria, Louisiana by Dr. B. C. Taylor. At the time I met her, I was in B-17 training, and they were going to ship us to Europe. They sent me to Hunter Field, Savannah, in March of 1945, I met her in January of 1945, and while I was there, I fell in love with her. I knew she was the girl for me. Of course, I had to convince her a little bit.

**Ms. Higgins:** A marriage six months later didn't take too much convincing.

**Mr. Whitfield:** No. Anyway, so I was in Hunter Field, and I went to the Trinity Methodist Church in downtown Savanna, and I'm sitting on the porch, and the Minister, Dr. George Cleary, asked me to teach a Sunday school class of young high school girls. And of course they all came because I was a GI, but I wasn't looking for them. But, I'm sitting on the porch on the day President Roosevelt died....People ask, "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" I remember April 12, 1945. The war in Europe was winding down, so then they decided they didn't need us, so I was transferred to Barksdale, Shreveport, Louisiana. And that was 120 miles up from Alexandria. I'd hitchhike back and forth and she said, "You're going to kill yourself on the road." So then we got married in 1945, while I was still in the service. And at Barksdale I was in B-29 training, and then I was shipped to Kearney, Nebraska when they dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima. Then a few days later, they dropped the second one. That was when Japan surrendered but I was at Kearney, Nebraska then, and we were supposed to be sent to Japan, but that was canceled. Actually, while I was in the service, they took me out to work for the Western Pacific Railroad for two months as a telegraph operator. Because of all the traffic being pushed from the east coast to the west coast along with a lot of other servicemen. I worked there for two months, and when I got back to Kearney, my crew had been shipped out. I found out later that they never went overseas either.

**Ms. Higgins:** Do you feel without the atomic bombs perhaps you would've gone to help them invade Japan?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, no. They would've probably kept me there because with everything being moved from the European theater, you didn't have any big humongous planes in those days. In fact, in a little aside, they claimed all the allies won the European War because Hitler put all his faith in the Autobahn and neglected the railroad system.

**Ms. Higgins:** In Norway, they blew up the railroad tracks.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Whenever they hurt the railroads they helped us in Europe. I can recall as a boy, when the Army had the railroads in Fort Hancock. They had a railroad and they would bring the trains down and along the shore. One time they took them out of Fort Hancock to go down to Lewes, Delaware for maneuvers. I guess it was National Guard. I assume, because I don't know. I was still a young guy, but I'd see the guns going through the town on the tracks.

**Ms. Higgins:** There was no covering those up, because they were so big.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Oh yes, they were big. And the soldiers were hanging on the side of the flat cars. They were only going about twenty miles an hour, but the idea was to move along the railroad for coastal defense. And as I understand, they worked on something with a missile system. They had a place out in South Dakota in the 1960s.

**Ms. Higgins:** Can you tell me how you went from Long Branch into the service?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well actually, my official residence was always with my parents in Eatontown. I went into the service and met Carolyn. When I came back from the service in 1946, I had my opportunity by seniority to take the jobs that had come open during the War. We had a very fine gentleman who was the mayor of Highlands, George Hardy. He was also the agent at the Highlands Station. Right after the war was over, he retired, and when I came back there they had a young man working the job who was not telegrapher, and they still handled the Western Union messages. And they wanted more telegraphers at the station so he said, "Well, that's a good job." It was only eight or ten miles from Eatontown where my folks lived, and that's how I got to Highlands. I was there for a while, and as things progressed, I worked at different places along what they call the Seashore Branch. I went to Atlantic Highlands Station, Port Monmouth Station, and because I was telegrapher, I became a train dispatcher at Long Branch in 1949. I worked in Long Branch for over thirty years until Conrail came in. Then they closed those jobs down. But that's how I got to Highlands. I like Highlands. We live right below the Twin Lights. We live just under where the postal telegraph had a telegraph station, back before the days of radio. They had a gentleman by the name Steve Murray, who was the telegraph operator. And when he saw ships so many miles out and he would send a telegram in New York that such-in-such schooner was so many miles out of Sandy Hook. Of course, when the radio became prevalent, that service became obsolete. When Mr. Murray retired, somehow the family got the property, and my house is right underneath that property. Now that property is part of the state park. When the son-in-law, Mr. Masciale died, the state bought the property. It's part of the Twin Lights State Park now. And our property adjoins the Twin Lights.

**Ms. Higgins:** Who was the famous person who sent the signal overseas from the Twin Lights?

**Mr. Whitfield:** That was Marconi. Actually, I don't think the signal went overseas. That was wireless, and the first experiments done at the Twin Lights is a different form of telegraphy, because it's wireless telegraphy. But the telegraph that I did was on a wire. And the Telegraph Company also had to telegraph some places out at Sandy Hook overlooking the sea. There were different things within the paper about how they would send carrier pigeons out and the carrier pigeon would bring the message in, and the telegraph operator would send it to New York, and things like that that beat the ships. The idea of the service was that the cargo ship owners could sign up for the service, and they'd know when their ship was going to be docked. They could have longshoremen down at the dock when the ship came in the harbor of New York. That was the whole idea.

**Ms. Higgins:** Did the lights in the Twin Lights ever bother you when your family was living under them?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No, because actually by that time, the big heavy light was shut down. It was shut down when World War II started, because of the enemy convoys coming up the coast. In fact, a couple of years ago, they found the wreckage of U-869, right over in Manasquan. People thought that it had been sunk off the African Coast. There was a big article in the Asbury Park Press about it. Apparently when it shot its torpedo out of the sleeve, it homed in on its own self, and blew itself up.

**Ms. Higgins:** And what was the name of the ship?

**Mr. Whitfield:** It was the German U-Boat, U-2869. I have the article at home.

**Ms. Higgins:** Today, you are serving as part of the Monmouth County Transportation Advisory Board. What are your duties there, and what is that board doing now?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, we're trying to improve public transportation. As I said, I'm in favor of the rail service to New York. When I retired from the railroad, Judge LaBrecque recruited me to be on the committee. In fact, he tried to get me on when I was still working, but after Conrail came in, I was transferred from a train dispatcher's job in the office. I became what they call a trainmaster, and basically, I was in charge of the freight service in this area. It had nothing really to do with passenger service, except when we had trouble. And then we worked together. I worked with another trainmaster on the electrification, and the first part of the electrification through South Amboy to Matawan, we had to coordinate the freight moves with the passenger trains, because of the construction work. I had retired by the time they extended the electrification from Matawan to Long Branch, but I kept an interest in it, because I knew some of the people.

**Ms. Higgins:** Does it end in Long Branch now?

**Mr. Whitfield:** It ends in Long Branch now. I would very much be in favor of extending that to Bradley Beach. There was some talk about abandoning a railroad south of Bradley Beach. Then they decided they wanted to keep it, because now they realize that as people move down, the rail service should go down to Lakehurst as soon as they could arrange it. The official position is that they want to try to go through Monmouth Junction, and that's part of the problem. I think they should do both, but of course, economics is economics and nobody wants to pay for anything. Everybody wants something for free. Now, to answer the question about trains going by houses: I can recall when I was a boy, the trains went through Eatontown. I would wake up with the first train going out of Red Bank, and the one going to Lakehurst with the mail and other stuff. I'd be awakened, so I knew it was time to get up and start getting ready to go to school. But the train doesn't run that often. If you live along side of the highway, for example, you would hear much more; I've seen articles in *New Jersey Magazine* commenting on these sound barriers along the highway. Traffic is a constant roar all day long. What's a train? The most a train runs is every ten minutes. You have nine minutes of silence.

**Ms. Higgins:** Besides, you like trains.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, most people do. In fact, one of the things that President Nixon said not too long before he died, was that he used to wake up in the morning and hear the train when he lived in California, and that was one of the things that was telling him to go. That was one of his reminiscences. Then, I had a case not too long before I retired. I was a trainmaster. We hit an automobile in a crossing where the cars were supposed to stop; two women got knocked out of their car. The Middlesex County prosecutor came, and I won't mention his name. After I said, "We can provide the crew whenever you need them for an investigation." He said, "Mr. Whitfield, can I please ask you a favor? Can I please get up on the engine?" And I said, "Of course." Here's a man who was a county official, and he had never been on a locomotive!

**Ms. Higgins:** You have named lots of places where the trains used to go, but I can't think of any train stations except the old Middletown one and the Red Bank one. Is there one in Atlantic Highlands?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No, it burned down.

**Ms. Higgins:** Or Highlands?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, actually just until a little while ago, there was a piece of the old newsstand that was there when they had the station, but that fell apart. Buddy Bahrs was active in Monmouth County and now his son-in-law's family runs Bahrs Restaurant. But I can remember when his father would come over

when I was the station agent in Highlands, and worry about how his son was running the business.

**Ms. Higgins:** Buddy's father?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Buddy's father.

**Ms. Higgins:** Let's talk about the Henry Hudson Regional High School. Was that of the first regional high schools in the area?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No, I think Freehold probably was the first. Henry Hudson was formed about 1962.

**Ms. Higgins:** Where did the kids go to high school prior to that?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The Atlantic Highlands High School. Our oldest child went up to his freshman year in Atlantic Highlands, and then Henry Hudson started. Our second child, David, was in the first class that went from grade seven to twelve. The two elementary schools in Atlantic Highlands and Highlands were reduced to grades K through six, and that's basically the way the district is today. My personal opinion is that it is too bad they didn't make it a regional district from grade K through twelve, but in New Jersey everything has to be home rule. I was elected to the local Highlands Board, and after I had served five years in Highlands, I was elected to the Regional Board. I served two terms in the Henry Hudson School Board. I enjoyed that very much, but when my work in the railroad started up here, I felt that I had to retire from the school board because by then I'd been working in Newark rather than Long Branch, and I was working nights sometimes. I asked not to be reelected, so when my second term was expiring, I dropped off the board. Sometime later somebody asked me to run again, but I said, "Well, my total school board experience was eleven years. I enjoyed it, and I have a lot of good friends that I still know from the school board." One year George McCallum was a vice president and I was the president, and the next year we reversed jobs. We used to rotate all the time. I always felt I represented the whole district, and I think that's what any regional school board should do. We were there to educate the kids. I'll say this for the record: any town that's a good town has a good school system, and I'm proud of the education my four kids got at Henry Hudson, and they all went to college.

**Ms. Higgins:** So, you have four kids.

**Mr. Whitfield:** We have two boys, a girl, and a boy. And our oldest son Mike lives in Alexandria, Virginia now.

**Ms. Higgins:** What does he do?

**Mr. Whitfield:** He's an accountant with a company called Hilltop Sand and Gravel, which builds golf courses on top of landfills which were originally sand pits.

**Ms. Higgins:** That's a good way to recycle.

**Mr. Whitfield:** That's right, and he likes to play golf, and he has two children. One, our oldest grandson, is twenty-one and a student at William and Mary. Our granddaughter, his daughter, seventeen is in High School. Then, our second son, David, is at a Boy Scout camp, which has its headquarters in Winston Salem, NC. He's the resident ranger and lives on the scout reservation in Raven Knob, Mount Airy, NC. He has two sons: nineteen and seventeen. The oldest one just became an Eagle Scout. And then our daughter married a young man from Pennsgrove whom she met at church camp, and they have two children: fifteen and eleven this year. They live in Coppell, Texas, which is a suburb between Dallas and Fort Worth.

**Ms. Higgins:** You and your wife must spend a lot of time in Dixie.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Our youngest son, John, lives at home with us. But David was in the first class that went all the way through Henry Hudson School, and that was the year I was president of the board, so I had the honor of handing him his diploma.

**Ms. Higgins:** You say you were active in the church in Highlands. What kind of things did a church in a small town do?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, we have a food pantry. Right now, the church is on what we call a circuit. The pastor makes one service in Sea Bright in the morning and the other one in Highlands. They work for the community, the doors are always open, people invite people to come. God offers a salvation, but some people do not accept it, and I'm not one to force religion down people's throats. You're there, and you invite people to come, and we minister to the community whenever people come. The Methodist tradition is that you always be respectful of other peoples' opinions. That was one of the things that John Wesley, who was basically our founding pastor, taught. Wesley was a clergymen in the Church of England, and when revolution came, he sent two men over to work with bishops to ordain more bishops. Frances Asbury, for whom Asbury Park is named, had what they call a Christmas conference in the Christmas of 1784 in Baltimore, Maryland. That was when the Methodist church in the United States began. Churches were active in the United States before that, and one of the early leaders was a British Army Captain by the name of Webb. You go to Ocean Grove; you see these streets named after him and others. A young lady, Barbara Heck, came there where men were playing cards, and she picked up the cards in her apron and threw them in the stove, saying, "Men, if you don't start to preach, you're all going to go to hell." And that was in a house on John Street in

downtown New York. That's our oldest Methodist society in the United States. Right down in the financial district.

**Ms. Higgins:** What other denominations does Highlands have?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, we two others, Episcopal and Catholic. St. Andrews is the Episcopal Church and Our Lady of Perpetual Help is the Catholic Church.

**Ms. Higgins:** What was Highlands like when you first came in the 1940s?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, we actually lived there for a little while when we stayed with my folks after we got married. We were down on Huddy Avenue then, where we rented for a while, and then had a chance to buy a house up underneath the Twin Lights, which we bought in 1947. So I've actually been a citizen of Highlands since 1946.

**Ms. Higgins:** What did Highlands look like in 1946?

**Mr. Whitfield:** We had a lot more bars. We used to have thirty-two bars and three churches.

**Ms. Higgins:** Was clamming a big industry back in the 1940s?

**Mr. Whitfield:** We had clamming, and of course the river became polluted because they didn't know about the sewers. I understand years ago, now I never personally ran into this, but years ago there was a big division between the kids who lived downtown and the kids lived on the hill, and they would fight all the time, but when I got there, that had kind of gone down. I heard stories about it, but it was before my time.

**Ms. Higgins:** And you actually lived in both places.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, just very briefly downtown. I like living up in the hill. I'm above the flood plain. We don't have to have flood insurance.

**Ms. Higgins:** There was a carousel in Highlands, right?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I can't remember when it burned, but I remember it burned. Highlands is just going to go for their 100th anniversary this year, 2000. It became a borough in 1900. They tried to find out the day of the carousel burning, but the people doing the Highlands history haven't been able to find a date. I can recall the burning, and I can recall our kids riding on it, but I can't recall when it burnt.

**Ms. Higgins:** There were many big fires: Alpine Manor Hotel, Tempus Fugit Hotel. There must good firefighters in Highlands, because as close as the houses are, these things didn't seem to spread.

**Mr. Whitfield:** The problem with Highlands are the malls. We used to have the mom and pop stores, but people started to go out of town to shop when they got cars and the mall. We used Bedles Drug Store in Highlands, until they were taken over by CVS and moved up on the hill. We still have our prescription records there. Fortunately, I don't get any prescriptions.

**Ms. Higgins:** Was there a movie house?

**Mr. Whitfield:** The movie house was made into a seafood store. You know, you can go there and buy your clams on the half shell or your lobsters or whatever. And of course, Highlands is noted for its restaurants. Bahrs is one. Doris and Ed's is another. A lot of them have been written up in the *New Jersey Magazine*. Lots of good people come down and go. Another thing is, Highlands is right across the river from Sandy Hook. But it has beautiful views. The only trouble is in the traffic in the summer, when everybody comes down by car and you can't get across the bridge.

**Ms. Higgins:** We need that trolley, Lester.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes, we need something. The trolley ran up on top of the hill and the train ran across along the foot of the hill. Now, when I first came to Highlands, the kids from Highlands went to school on the train to Atlantic Highlands.

**Ms. Higgins:** Is this how your children went?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No, because by the time they started going to high school, trains had stopped.

**Ms. Higgins:** But kids went by train to school in the Highlands once.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes. When I was the agent in the Highlands, I would sell tickets every month. The students would pick up their tickets. I had a list, and the Board of Education would cut me a voucher to pay for the student tickets. I think they were four dollars a person per month. Four dollars a month, and when they did away with the trains and put the buses on, they charged ten dollars a month, and I said, "You should've kept the train." All the trains run into Newark now, instead of the old days, when the Central used to go into Jersey City terminal where Liberty Park is now. They had a ferry across, and the Pennsylvania trains went to Penn Station.

**Ms. Higgins:** What are your recollections of people jumping off the bridge in Highlands?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I remember one of the kids in the Boy Scout troop got his fingers pinched; he was on a drawbridge.

**Ms. Higgins:** He didn't want to jump?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, I don't know what happened, but he was showing off, I think. But who knows?

**Ms. Higgins:** Would you explain this custom?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, kids would jump on the Sea Bright side, away from the channel. They wouldn't jump off the drawbridge itself, they'd jump off the fixed part, and they'd dive from the bridge and swim over to the shore.

**Ms. Higgins:** Regardless of boats that may be passing through?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, actually the only boat that would be in that area might be a rowboat or a little mussel boat.

**Ms. Higgins:** Did you ever do that jump?

**Mr. Whitfield:** No, I was grown up. But I found out a couple of my kids did. They told me several years later, well after the fact, and I'm sure some other people's kids did it.

**Ms. Higgins:** It was something Highlands kids did.

**Mr. Whitfield:** There was a movie made several years ago that was filmed in Highlands.

**Ms. Higgins:** Really, what was it?

**Mr. Whitfield:** It was kind of a vulgar movie, I tell you. Patricia Wettie was in it, and a girl jumped off a ferry boat. Scenes were filmed in Highlands, and it was showing scenes of a flood. We have it on videotape. There were a lot of four letter words, and a lot of theological language used in non-theological sense.

**Ms. Higgins:** I'm sure. Lester, can you also tell us about where you think Highlands is going? What's Highlands going to look like in 2075?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I understand some area people bought expensive houses and tore them down to make new houses. In fact, there has been some talk about that happening in Rumson just recently. I think that they've done some work on Bay Avenue: it looks a lot better now that they've got the sidewalks down. I feel most sad about the proliferation of townhouses and apartments, because I'm afraid some of those will be the slums of tomorrow. People who own their own

houses care: that goes for all races, all creeds, and all national backgrounds. You can go in the city of Newark and you can tell a house that's owned by the resident, because you'll see a nice oasis in the middle of a lot of slum houses. I think Highlands, because of its location, has a future. Of course, you have to watch the seawall. I was kind of ambivalent about pumping sand on the beaches because the wind takes it away, but it has made a difference for now. And of course that's an environmental thing. I'm in favor of the environment, and I can also see what their talking about when they oppose building high-rises right on the beach. I think that's stupid. For one thing, they're in danger of collapsing into the ocean. That was proven during one of these big hurricanes on the Gulf coast. People were up in this high-rise having a big party and the storm came and the thing collapsed. And the whole bunch was killed. That was during one of these hurricanes that happened several years ago down along the Mississippi or Alabama coasts.

**Ms. Higgins:** Could that happen on the Jersey Shore?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, you have Sea Bright, the high-rises in Monmouth Beach and Long Branch. Furthermore, high-rises take away property value. And of course, the other thing, they're worried about is building too close to the hill. The hill could collapse, and that's happened in California. The Jersey coast is more stable, but based on the location, I think Highlands is always going to be Highlands. Would it be advantageous to become a part of a larger community? There's some talk about making Sandy Hook a separate park from Gateway and I think the more you fractionalize things, the more it's costly. You know, it's sort of like the railroads in the early days of railroading. Before that, you'd go ten miles and have to change trains. People don't want to do that.

**Ms. Higgins:** I guess not.

**Mr. Whitfield:** You had to change trains because you used to have different railroads, different gauges. They were pretty much all standard gauges, but they were little short lines that built them, then they became part of the system. The Long Branch and Seashore was the original name of the Railroad Company up from through Long Branch to Sandy Hook, which became part of the Central Railroad. But then you had the Keyport Dock Rail, The New Jersey Southern, which was originally the Delaware, Raritan Bay, became the New Jersey Southern, which became the Central Railroad of New Jersey's Southern Division. And lines up above in Northern New Jersey are all part of what became part of the Conrail eventually. So, you can go back in history, maybe they would make a new corporation with another ten miles of railroad. And they became part of the Central Railroad in New Jersey, which became part of Conrail which became part of New Jersey Transit.

**Ms. Higgins:** When you go swimming in the ocean, where do you go?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Sandy Hook.

**Ms. Higgins:** You ever walk over the rocks anymore?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Well, not anymore now.

**Ms. Higgins:** A previous interviewer out of Highlands said that a lot of residents of Highlands used to simply climb over those rocks and swim.

**Mr. Whitfield:** Yes, they do. When I go, I usually go over for maybe a half an hour in the afternoon, and go to one of the beaches where there is a place to park. It's easier to drive than walk, especially as I don't like to walk barefoot. Kids are good that way, but the stones and pebbles hurt my toes and the soles of my feet.

**Ms. Higgins:** What is your opinion of beach rights?

**Mr. Whitfield:** I think the beaches belong to the public. The public pays a good part of the money to protect them. Everybody should have the right to use them.

**Ms. Higgins:** And build them up, too?

**Mr. Whitfield:** But, I also believe in fees. I don't think it's fair for some farmer in Kansas to subsidize the land coast, because he's never going to get to use it. If people use it, they should pay for it. I mean if you're going to come everyday. I think car passes are reasonable. That's what I get. I'm a senior citizen, so I get the half-rate, but I don't think I went that many times to use the thirty dollars worth. When our grandkids were little, they'd come more, and I'd take them out and we'd go swimming for a while.

**Ms. Higgins:** Do people still swim in the river in the Highlands?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Oh, yes. Actually, Highlands has lifeguards now: one down by the bridge, one up at Miller Street, and one up by the Water Witch section by where the Community Center building is. We have a good program at the Community Center: they have a preschool class, an after school class, and they have the senior citizens meet down there. Lots of times they interact. In fact, we've done some programs together. They do a good job.

**Ms. Higgins:** Do you have any programs with the church?

**Mr. Whitfield:** We have Head Start in our church sponsored by the Inter-Community Coordinating Council, which is based in Neptune. Our church in Highlands is just one of the schools in Monmouth County. They hire the staff and we provide the space. This arrangement of course, helps the entire area.

**Ms. Higgins:** If you had a few things that you would like to say to future generations who will be reading and listening to this document, what would you say?

**Mr. Whitfield:** Number one: Remember the people who walk when you make any plans; make sidewalks. I've mentioned this at the Planning Board of Transportation. They widened Route 537, out by East Freehold Road: there's five lanes of traffic and not one sidewalk. Once, when I went out to visit a friend at Applewood, I was getting ready to turn, and this man was riding against me on a bicycle. I almost hit him because I couldn't see him in the dusk. He had no place to ride, so he was riding basically in the driver's area. I once read a book called *Divided Highways*, written with the idea that when we built the highways we ruined a lot of neighborhoods. The sad part is that they provided for mass transit, but they've never put it in. Everybody thought the automobile was going to be king and it isn't. People move out to Arizona for their health, but the air pollution out there is almost as bad as it is here in New Jersey because of all the automobile exhaust. People complain about the inspection system and blame the governor, but it's not the governor, it's the federal government. The more you get the federal government to do things, the less you have control over things. I believe that the states should be able to run their own business.

**Ms. Higgins:** It seems like you don't want the little towns and the little schools to be running totally autonomously and yet, you don't want the federal government to have control. You seem balanced.

**Mr. Whitfield:** I have a lot of friends from out of state, and I say, "Don't judge New Jersey by the Jersey Turnpike." New Jersey is a wonderful state; I'm glad I was born here. And I say I'm a resident of Monmouth County and I'm proud to say that. I lived here all my life. I can remember when Eatontown was a little town, and some of the things we did. I remember going to the Worlds Fair on a train when I was seventeen. I graduated from Long Branch High School in 1939; we just had our sixtieth high school reunion. I used to arrange for train rides. The school teacher would call up when I was in Long Branch and we would take the kids on train rides. I like Monmouth County. I think that our Freeholders are doing a good job. I like what you're doing here; I think this is important. I like history. I've always been interested in history. I think that this is a great country, and I don't want to divide it North and South. I believe that the Confederate veterans have a right to be honored by the Confederate flag if they so choose. My great-grandfather was killed at the Battle of Chancellorsville. He was a second lieutenant in a New Jersey thirteenth regiment. That's the same battle at which Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was killed by his own troops. He was mortally wounded. He was also wounded at Antietam and I had the privilege of going to Antietam, but that's where we lost 17,000 American boys because of people not loving one other. War is wrong. I don't believe in war. The people who fight aren't the guys who make the money. And that's the another thing: we

should honor our veterans. The poor guys that went to Vietnam were spit at. That's wrong.

**Ms. Higgins:** Have you ever considered running for public office yourself?

**Mr. Whitfield:** My wife said she would divorce me if I did, and I don't want to get divorced. The only thing I ran for was the school board. When Bob Wilson was still mayor of Highlands, somebody asked me if I'd run for mayor. They proposed my name and I didn't know it. But you know, I wouldn't ever run.

**Ms. Higgins:** It seems natural; it really does.

**Mr. Whitfield:** I enjoyed going to the meetings with Judge LaBrecque, but I don't say too much. I said I was his designated driver, because I took him to the transportation meeting. I drove the car. He was a fine gentleman. I knew him long before he was a judge, when he was a lawyer, and he was interested in transportation like I was. That's why I appreciated working with him and Ted Narozanick. I am most proud of being appointed to the Monmouth County Transportation Committee. We had two Democrats and three Republicans on the Board of Chosen Freeholders; all five of them voted for me. I think that the answer to the question what they should do with the Freehold Line and on the Highlands is to put a light rail line in from Freehold all the way down to Highlands, and connect it with the coastline at Matawan. People could come in, and it could be very well done with a new Matawan-Aberdeen station.

**Ms. Higgins:** It's been a real pleasure interviewing you. Thank you, Lester.