



## **Interview with Anna Nichols and Martha Nichols Rakita**

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

**Date of Interview: September 18, 2000**

**Name of Interviewer: Rhoda Newman**

**Premises of Interview: 31 Ocean Pathway, Ocean Grove, NJ**

**Birthdate(s) of Subject(s): Martha Nichols Rakita: February 6, 1922**

**Anna Catherine Nichols: April 18, 1927**

**Ms. Newman:** Martha Rakita is affiliated with the Historical Society of Ocean Grove. She holds the position of past president. Anna Nichols has been a Trustee of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association for twenty-four years. Now, you both are sisters. Please tell me how long you have been in Ocean Grove, what your early memories are, and what changes you've seen happen here.

**Ms. Nichols:** I've been in Ocean Grove since I was six weeks old. My mother brought me here then. I don't know how old Martha was when she came here.

**Ms. Newman:** Ocean Grove has something unique in the country, and that is the Methodist Camp Meeting in Ocean Grove. Can you just describe the tents for people who aren't familiar with the Methodist Camp Meeting?

**Ms. Nichols:** There are one hundred and fourteen tents. Ocean Grove was established as a camp meeting association, which meant that people came here for a camp meeting, pitched their own tents, had their camp meeting week or

weeks, and when it was over they went home. It usually lasted two to three weeks. The central auditorium was a huge tent, and everybody just pitched their own tents around it. Eventually the auditorium became a permanent structure, and the tents started being more permanent. In the wintertime, what you see in the tent colony are platforms with a small building behind it. In the summertime what you see are canvas tents over the platforms and then you don't see the little cottage because the tent covers the whole thing. In the wintertime everything that you have in the canvas part of the tent is put back into the cottage; in the summer, it's all brought back out again. Every tent is the same, and every tent is different. They are the same in that they're almost all approximately the same size and made the same way. They are different in that everybody's personality is in their own tent. And so no two tents are even remotely alike.

**Ms. Rakita:** Well, there are today a hundred and fourteen tents left. But as a child I can remember many tents along Wesley Lake, up in the Northern end of Wesley Lake very close to the ocean. Many, many tents. I can remember many tents. Wesley Lake separates Ocean Grove from Asbury Park. But my point is that in the years that I remember, there were many more tents in Ocean Grove than there are today. There were many tents, many tents, down in what we call the South end of town, near Fletcher Lake. Rows and rows of tents. Fletcher Lake separates Ocean Grove from Bradley Beach. Where the retirement home, Frances Asbury, is now used to be a tent colony. So that's one of the things that I remember. My sister was talking about decoration, the use of doors on the tents, which is an anachronism. It is an anachronism to have this canvas structure and then a wooden door on that canvas structure. This has come about within the last twenty to thirty years. As a child growing up, nobody had a door on their tent. We used the canvas and we tied the canvas together at night. On a very, very hot night, my mother wouldn't close the flaps, she would just use a fabric screen which she put it across the front of the tent because it made it a lot cooler. And that's a big difference that I remember as a child versus now. Of course another big difference that I remember as a child, and I'm thinking now of the early Depression years, 1930 and 1935. I think there were more tents not erected than those that were put up, because people could not afford a rental. This was the depths of Depression, and Ocean Grove, for all its history, has not attracted a wealthy clientele, so their clientele was really hit by the Depression. And many, many, many of the tents were never put up because they were not rented. My point is that the empty tent platforms were a wonderful place for kids to play. I mean we could skate, we could play Parcheesi, we could have a doll house. It was a marvelous place to play for kids.

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, mostly Martha played those kind of games. I guess we played handball on the platform because we had a wooden background, and it was a perfect place to play handball, to play tennis, like you would on the tennis court, although actually I didn't have a tennis racquet, I had kind of a paddle ball type of thing. But it was still the same kind of thing. But it was a wonderful place to play. The rent was twenty-five dollars a season.

**Ms. Rakita:** The rentals on the tents are slightly different, depending on the square footage of the tent. I think my mother said she paid fifty dollars during the Depression for a four month season. That's May 15 until September 15. So it's twelve dollars and fifty cents a month rental. But in those days, as today, the tent did all the work. The tent brings all the furniture, does all of the gardening; the Camp Meeting only sets the tent up and takes it down. This is not a criticism of the camp, but it's always been this way; that's the only thing that they have done. The rest of the decorations and the improvements are all done by renters. So it's not quite as cheap as it sounds, because if you rented somewhere else, you'd walk in and even the beds might be made, and that's not true in a tent. But rentals today are still comparatively low, about thirty-five hundred, although some of the big tents cost as much as four thousand a season. For a four month season, at the very highest, the rent is a thousand dollars a month. You can't get a place in Long Beach Island for a thousand dollars a week these days.

**Ms. Newman:** So you came here during the summers and spent some time in the tents.

**Ms. Nichols:** Oh, yes! We spent the whole summer here. My father was a teacher. And so we came here all summer. Actually, my parents took us out of school before school was over for some reason. I guess because the last few weeks of school are kind of a waste of time anyway for little kids. And we stayed until probably the week after Labor Day, because school started later then. And so we spent the entire summer here.

**Ms. Newman:** Would the families who were here come back each season?

**Ms. Rakita:** The same as it is now. We have friends that we made as children here whose descendents come. And some of the same people we knew are still coming down to the tents.

**Ms. Nichols:** Louise Bown is a good case in point. She lived on a tent on Pilgrim Pathway, and now her daughter has a tent on Central Avenue.

**Ms. Rakita:** And she was a very good friend of mine. So I've known her from the time I was ten years old right up to now.

**Ms. Newman:** So the traditions carry on.

**Ms. Nichols:** It's not a hundred percent that there's been a tradition carried on. But as the tents get harder and harder to get, I think the tradition will flourish because people will be unwilling to give them up. There is a very long waiting list for tents, and there is now a waiting list for cottages, too. So it has changed a lot from the point of view that we never had a lock on our tent; when you didn't have doors, there was no lock there. But even the middle part, which had a door, and probably a lock for the winter, although I don't remember it, was never locked. The whole tent was just open front to back.

And it never occurred to us that anybody would ever go in there or do anything, and nobody ever did. I'm not sure that would be true today, although I don't know if it would be so much malice as curiosity. If I left my tent open, I really wouldn't trust that somebody wouldn't walk through and look at it. Because I was having a group of people come one day, and at the end of the line, there were people I didn't know, and I said, "Can I help you?" And they said, "Oh, we just wanted to see your tent." So people will walk in. Another funny thing, during the Depression, we always had to rent a tent by the summer. At the very beginning of the 1900s, the Camp Meeting Association was renting them by the week for a while, because it was in the old records. But people would walk by, and my mother always got the biggest laugh out of this: they would walk by and very carefully explain to their friends that these tents were for poor people who were brought here for a week in the summertime to have a vacation and then they went home and some more poor people came down the next week. And the camp meeting did this as a service to the poor people of Philadelphia for some reason. Well, that was about as far from the truth as you can get! Nowadays there are plenty of wealthy people in the tents, but not at that time. I think we weren't poor, but certainly nobody was rich. My father had a job, that was being rich. So that was a funny story that I can remember, and I've heard it so many times myself. And my mother told that story probably a hundred times because she got such a kick out of it. But it has evolved from a kind of community where you wouldn't find a lock on anybody's door to the tents being locked up and really carefully boarded up in the winter. But there again, when people break into the tents in the winter, it's very seldom for mischief, it's usually kids who want to have a clubhouse, or maybe a homeless person who needs a place to stay. But very, very little thievery goes on in the wintertime. And it's a tent, anybody can break in, even though it's a wooden structure, but usually we don't have that kind of problem. Cottages have more problems than we do in the tent colony. It has happened. But it's rare. Breaking in is common, but losing anything is rare. They usually just come in. I mean, my mother can remember a time when somebody came into her tent and lived there all winter long. And nobody knew it until she got down and realized that all the bed clothing was out, and the dishes were all out, and there was food around. So people had lived there, but they didn't do anything bad, they just made a mess of the place. So when Ocean Grove



**Left to right: Anna Nichols, Martha Nichols Rakita, and Martha's daughter, Nancy Rakita Winn in front of the tents in Ocean Grove**

opened its streets, it didn't affect life in the tent colony very much except that I think our security became a little bit more of an issue.

**Ms. Newman:** Can you explain a little about the chains on the gate?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, yes. Up until 1979 there were actually chains on the gates on Main Avenue, Stockton Avenue, and Broadway, and you couldn't drive in here. The only vehicles that were around in Ocean Grove on Sunday were doctors' cars, police, and firemen. No one else. You weren't even allowed to ride a bicycle. You weren't allowed to go on the beach. Well, if you were fully clothed you were allowed to go on the beach, but you weren't allowed to go in the ocean on Sunday. So there have been changes since then when we were actually closed, but as I said, when the gates opened, the effect on the tent colony was rather minimal. It didn't change the personnel, it didn't change the way we lived, except we were just a little more conscientious about security because people could get in and out a lot faster if they have cars. We had our own police department before the gates were open. And our own police department was very conscientious about watching over Ocean Grove. Then when the gates opened, Neptune took over, and they only have two cars assigned to Ocean Grove at any one time. I think that's why Ben Douglas felt that he should start the Ocean Grove Civilian Patrol, so that we'd have a little bit more of a presence of some kind of security.

**Ms. Newman:** Tell us about Sundays when you were growing up.

**Ms. Rakita:** Sundays were a little difficult for a kid because of all the "don'ts." You couldn't go swimming, and I can remember one very hot Sunday when I went to the beach fully clothed, I went down to the water and I was wet all the way to my waist. My mother was very understanding and never said a word. Because I couldn't go swimming, I just went wading, and I was fully clothed. You couldn't ride your bicycles, couldn't play cards, but there was one thing that we did on Sunday afternoon. There would be the church service in the morning, and then there would be a men's bible class from two to four. And then after that I would go into the auditorium and hunt for pennies. People would drop nickels and pennies on the floor as the offering was being taken. Well, that was not a very good Sunday activity. But the auditorium was open, and I can remember doing that a lot on Sundays. One of the big things that's different now in the tents versus when we were growing up, was we had no hot water. All we had was a toilet. My sister now has a full bathroom, a tub, a lovely shower, a sink - all we had was a toilet and a sink. So it was very important for us to go to the beach every day because that's the way we got our bath. And of course at the beach you changed your clothes in the bathhouse because you were not allowed to walk on the streets of Ocean Grove in a bathing suit. So you changed your clothes and they had beautiful showers and you could soap up so it was very practical and that's the way kids, adults, everybody took their bath. If we had a

stretch of long, bad weather, my mother would heat up some water on the stove, and she had a great big iron tub and we would take a bath in the tub.

**Ms. Newman:** But you had running water.

**Ms. Rakita:** Oh, yes, we had running water, but there was no hot water, it was just cold water.

**Ms. Newman:** Do you remember when hot water came in?

**Ms. Nichols:** My parents had their tent rebuilt in 1955 and I believe this is when we installed hot water because they had a tub and a shower installed in a real bathroom.

**Ms. Rakita:** I remember the cold water so it couldn't have been before - let's say it came in well after World War II.

**Ms. Nichols:** I would guess that would probably be when, too.

**Ms. Rakita:** My mother would never have come to the tent unless it had a lavatory. But many tents did not have toilets, and there were privies throughout the tent colonies for those people who didn't have plumbing in the tents.

**Ms. Nichols:** When we say that we had hot water, this is probably because my mother and father decided to put in hot water. Because ten years ago there were still people who didn't have hot water in the tents, and then Neptune came in and said, "You must not only have hot water, but you must have showers in the tents." And so they put in certain code enforcements, and an awful lot of showers suddenly appeared on the back porch of tents, and hot water heaters also. But I'm positive that we had hot water in our tent only because my parents decided to do that.

**Ms. Newman:** Where was your home when you were growing up?

**Ms. Rakita:** Philadelphia.

**Ms. Newman:** How long did it take you to get from Philadelphia to Ocean Grove?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, my father had a car, so I guess two hours.

**Ms. Rakita:** It seemed like a tremendously long ride, but it really wasn't. We came through Trenton, and then after you got on the outskirts of Trenton, you had a choice of going down Route 33 to Hightstown or going the "wheat way," which was still all farms; it was a country road, and I'm sure it has a number now, that we took to get to Hightstown. One of the other things that was very common in the thirties and forties and fifties, which is not quite so common today, is that

the man of the house brought the family down to Ocean Grove for the summer time, and then he was here only for the weekends. Early Monday morning he got up and drove to New York, or to Philadelphia, and went to business for the week. Went to his own home for the week.

**Ms. Newman:** So during the week it was just women and children.

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes. And this was very, very, very, very common. And then on Friday night the men would come back down and they would be here for the weekend.

**Ms. Nichols:** See, commuting back then was not as easy as it is now. I mean a man can now commute to work every day and come back to Ocean Grove at night, but then it wasn't that easy. So if you worked outside of Ocean Grove, you stayed out until the weekend.

**Ms. Newman:** But there were trains?

**Ms. Nichols:** There were trains coming in from New York, but none coming in from Philadelphia.

**Ms. Rakita:** Never has been a direct train from Philadelphia.

**Ms. Nichols:** The bus service from Philadelphia used to be marvelous, but now it's non-existent. But my father got rid of his car because he was a totally incompetent driver. He got rid of his car right before the second World War, and he never got another one. So he took the bus back and forth. Marvelous bus service. But no train service.

**Ms. Newman:** When you grew up you went into teaching, Anna?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, I went to college and I learned to be a Physical Education Teacher and I also taught swimming here for many years.

**Ms. Rakita:** Now, that's very important, she's being very modest. She taught, literally, two generations of kids to swim.

**Ms. Nichols:** I did it for thirty-three years.

**Ms. Rakita:** She did it for thirty-three years; that's how you get the two generations. She got the job because of my dear Mr. Hess, who was the swimming teacher. I loved Mr. Hess, and he loved me. The Hesses had no children, so I was like their daughter. And I just loved Mr. Hess. To make a long story short, now I realize that at a rather young age, Mr. Hess went blind. It was the summer of 1943, and they couldn't get anybody to teach swimming. And here

is this gal who is this marvelous swimmer, so at age fourteen, correct me if I'm wrong, my sister started teaching swimming at the North End pool.

**Ms. Newman:** The North End pool near the boardwalk?

**Ms. Nichols:** It's behind the North End Hotel.

**Ms. Rakita:** It's still there, and for those of us who swam in it all our lives, it's a sad, sad site. It's a huge hole in the ground with a lot of junk in it now. But it was a large, fifty yard by about twenty yards, salt water pool. And the water was not free-flowing; the water was changed three times a week.

**Ms. Nichols:** Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night the pool water was dumped.

**Ms. Rakita:** It never circulated, and it never had any chemicals in there, it was just salt water.

**Ms. Newman:** So it was pumped manually?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, there were pumps out in the ocean and no, it wasn't pumped manually. There was a machine that was turned on and it pulled the water down through the sand into the pumps so that filtered it and brought it back into the pool. The downside of that is that if the ocean was cold, the pool was cold. And so it was really sometimes unswimmable because it was so cold.

**Ms. Newman:** When did the pool close down?

**Ms. Nichols:** Probably in the early 1980s.

**Ms. Rakita:** Well, Mom died in 1989, and was she still swimming in the pool the last couple of years of her life.

**Ms. Nichols:** Yes, come to think of it, I think she was.

**Ms. Rakita:** The pool remained open long after the whole North End complex was closed. The pool was still available.

**Ms. Newman:** And you kept on teaching swimming?

**Ms. Nichols:** No, I stopped teaching in 1977.

**Ms. Rakita:** Mr. Hess charged five dollars for eight lessons, and so when my sister took it over, she also charged five dollars for eight lessons.

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, the fee was assigned for the swimming lessons by the Camp Meeting Association, so I agreed.

**Ms. Newman:** You were fourteen, and in those days it was quite a lot of money, was it not?

**Ms. Rakita:** But the point of it is, we were having inflation so that was perfectly okay to do. When I think now of the insurance rate and everything -- there was no guard in the pool either -- that the Camp Meeting Association allowed a fourteen year old girl without any credentials other than the fact that she was an excellent swimmer, to teach swimming lessons for money. But they were very happy to have somebody to do it.

**Ms. Nichols:** We got a swimming team together and our swimming team was the best in the area. We went undefeated for eight years. The kids were really good, and most of them eventually became lifeguards, and now their children are lifeguards, and that kind of thing. But the pool was really the center of social life in Ocean Grove. Unfortunately, the Camp Meeting Association in its questionable wisdom closed it because it wasn't making any money. When I was teaching I had hundreds of kids, and seventy-five kids on the swimming team. And every kid has a mother, a father, a grandmother, grandfather, sister and brother, so one kid on my team would attract five or six other people from their family to come to the pool. When I stopped teaching, somebody took over, but the program died in less than three years. It just bottomed out and people stopped coming. So it became a financial drain on the Camp Meeting Association to continue to run the pool. They should have done it anyway. It was probably, in hindsight, which is always 20/20, the dumbest mistake they made, closing the North End. Dismantling the merry-go-round was another dumb mistake. Those kinds of things would have kept that a vital region, but they decided to go down to nothing. It was a shame.

**Ms. Newman:** Do you ever see it coming back?

**Ms. Nichols:** Possibly not as it was. The land is too valuable now. A few houses along Ocean Pathway are now worth a half a million dollars. That land is probably worth four or five million dollars now. And so some developer will be coming in there and probably put up some kind of a high rise condo. Well, it can't be more than five floors, but there will be some kind of a condo or something. So it's unlikely that particular of land will ever be used for a swimming pool again unless the developer comes in with the idea of developing a really great recreational complex.

**Ms. Rakita:** But that's kind of left to chance. It's part of what we remember. Growing up in the tents and being swimmers and everything. Getting back to tent life -

**Ms. Newman:** Most of the people who came to the tents came from elsewhere, didn't they? They didn't live in Ocean Grove.

**Ms. Nichols:** That's generally true. Ocean Grove's winter population was really quite small, although now this is really a winter resort as well as a summer. But then the place just emptied out in winter. I think there were eight thousand people living here in the winter time and over a hundred thousand in the summer. But that's no longer true.

**Ms. Newman:** When you were kids, was there interaction with the town kids?

**Ms. Nichols:** No.

**Ms. Rakita:** Not much. You were known as to whether you swam at the North End or the South End.

**Ms. Newman:** What were the social distinctions?

**Ms. Rakita:** Well, just that if you lived in this area, uptown, you swam at the North End, and if you lived maybe the other side of Main Avenue, or certainly the other side of Broadway, you swam at South End.

**Ms. Newman:** And Ocean Grove is just one mile square.

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes, right. But even that was a division, because the bulk of the single family year round housing is south of Main Avenue. The Southenders weren't all year rounders, but the year rounders swam at South End, and the summer people swam definitely at the North end. This area had very, very few houses where people lived year round. There's one house in the tent colony where the people lived year round.

**Ms. Newman:** Martie, can you tell us about the historical society and your role in it?

**Ms. Rakita:** Oh, sure. It was formed in 1970 and was really the impetus of the hundredth celebration in 1969 when Ocean Grove had a big celebration for its hundredth anniversary. To celebrate that anniversary, a family by the name of Skold gave a absolutely authentic Victorian cottage to the camp meeting, and it was moved and set up in a piece of ground at McClintok and Central Avenue and it was called Centennial Cottage because it was set up on the hundredth anniversary of Ocean Grove. The woman who was most instrumental in getting it set up was a woman by the name of Edith Ashenback, who is still living. She's ninety-eight years old. And she was also able to get beautiful Victorian antiques to furnish this lovely but very modest little Victorian cottage. Well, this caused an interest in Ocean Grove history, and the historical society was born in 1970. The Camp Meeting Association suggested that the Historical Society take over the

management of Centennial Cottage. And we have done so ever since. We have grown since that time. We have a very interesting relationship with the Camp Meeting Association in that there are two pieces of property. This is Centennial Cottage, which the Association owns but for which we have spent within the last five years, without any exaggeration, thirty thousand dollars. We have gotten matching grants for that kind of money. The Camp Meeting Association also owned Beersheba, which was in dreadful condition, in 1976.

**Ms. Newman:** This was in Auditorium Square.

**Ms. Nichols:** It was the first well driven in Ocean Grove.

**Ms. Rakita:** And as a present to the town, the Historical Society restored Beersheba in 1976, and since that time we have taken over the care of Beersheba. In 1994 we again did a complete restoration. We put an entirely new hand-cut cedar tile roof on it. Each tile is hand cut in an interesting diamond cut shape. We repaired the gingerbread, all that sort of thing. And now we're painting it on a four year schedule. I was looking at it as I went past just a couple days ago, and although it is not due to be painted until the year 2002, it's starting to break through already.

**Ms. Newman:** Salt air does it.

**Ms. Rakita:** By June 2002 it's going to need it again desperately.

**Ms. Newman:** Beersheba is the symbol for the Historical Society.

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes, that's the logo for the historical society, which is one of the reasons that we feel we want to keep it in pristine condition. But there again, it doesn't belong to us, it belongs to the Camp Meeting Association, so it's a very interesting relationship we have. But back to tents. The one thing that I can remember as a kid in the tents was that, of course, most of the women who were here all week long had no cars. There were quite a few grocery stores in Ocean Grove: there was an A&P on Pilgrim Pathway, there was an Acme on Main Avenue, there was also what we now call Pathway Market. It was called Strassbergers in those days. The ice man came through every day, and because nobody had an electric box, everybody had an ice box. There were two or three men who came through town with fresh vegetables. Wasn't there also a fish man?

**Ms. Newman:** Oh, yes. And Mrs. Thompson's very famous pies. Mrs. Wagner's pies started in Ocean Grove in those days, too.

**Ms. Rakita:** When we were having a northeaster, with three days of rain, we would walk across the bridges to Cookman Avenue in Asbury Park. There were beautiful shops, and we went to Steinbach's, and we went to Tepper's, which

was another very nice family clothing store. There were shoe stores on Cookman Avenue, there was a huge Woolworth's, there was a Newbury's, there was a McCrory's, and a Kresge's, so it was a shopping paradise. Not that we had a lot of money, but that kind of shopping was available to you on those special occasions.

**Ms. Newman:** You had milkmen come?

**Ms. Rakita:** Oh, yes.

**Ms. Newman:** There was a dairy down the South End near the Broadway entrance, wasn't there?

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes. But the milkman came, the iceman came, and as my sister said, the breadman came, Dugan's breadman came, the vegetable man came. In the alley between Olin Street and Main Avenue there was a shoe maker, and I was petrified of this shoe maker. I was scared to death of that man. He seemed to me to be about eight feet tall, although I'm sure he wasn't. And he had bushy eyebrows, and was very gruff, and I was petrified of him.

**Ms. Nichols:** He had a long, long mustache. And he had a very low voice and a very fierce face. But to show you how small his shoe store was, his store is now some bakery or something, a little coffee shop, that two people couldn't fit in at the same time. That was his store. We didn't go through that alley because we were all afraid of him. I mean it wasn't just Martha and me, every kid in Ocean Grove was afraid of him. We wouldn't go through that alley because we were scared to death of him, and he always sat outside in the alley. I'm sure he was a wonderful, gentle man, but he looked like a giant, and his mustache made him look very fierce, and we were all scared to death of him.

**Ms. Rakita:** I think he was Italian. Here's another thing which is really nice. I think I have been permanently influenced in an appreciation of and understanding of organ music because our tent was right next to the Great Auditorium, and every day there was an organ concert at three o'clock. And at the end of the organ concert, they always played this piece that had been written years ago by an Ocean Grove organist by the name of Reynolds. It's called "The Storm at Sea." And the organ even had lightening. By pushing various buttons you had thunder, you had lightening, it was a wonderful piece. And so it was a real privilege to grow up constantly hearing this organ. And then Josephine Eddowes was a very nice, talented organist. And then we had two or three very fine organists, and by the time I was married, we got Gordon Turk, and of course we've had Gordon Turk for twenty-seven years. The organist that I remember as a child was Clarence Coleman. He was a man who weighed about three hundred and fifty pounds, he was huge, grossly, grossly, grossly overweight. He lived at the hotel on Main Avenue and New York Avenue, and if he wasn't at the organ he was always on the front porch there. He was a good organist - but none of the

organists that we had growing up can hold a candle to Gordon Turk. He is a consummate artist. We had none of that. But the organ was in dreadful shape, too. I'm not taking anything away from Gordon, but one of the reasons that Gordon can play so well is that the organ has been upgraded from fifteen hundred pipes to nine thousand, and forty ranks to one hundred and fifty-five ranks. It's huge. It's a much finer instrument than it was in the old days. Growing up listening to that organ all my life made a permanent impression. Being an usher has always carried a social status in Ocean Grove, and my father became an usher in 1944. The ushers wore white suits, they did not wear the blue coats and the white pants as they do today. When my father first became an usher, we didn't have the money for him to just go to a store and buy a white suit, so we all put money together and bought him a white suit for Christmas. The rhythm of the program in the summer time definitely affected the tent colony. And of course the other thing that I can remember, especially in the 1940s, after things got to be a little bit better, was those tremendous crowds attending the Sunday Service. Seven thousand people was not unusual at all. Sometimes eight or nine thousand attended.

**Ms. Newman:** This is when there were well known preachers?

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes, and because you didn't have the distraction of other things, and it just was very popular thing to do. I'm only talking about the Sunday service, and the support system that you needed for that. In those days, there were just block after block after block of what you would call boarding houses, where people had a room, and the bathroom was down the hall, and they very often took their meals at the boarding house. Sometimes they went to Main Avenue to the Grand Atlantic Cafeteria or the Sampler Inn. What I remember was that in the summer time the hotels and boarding houses were all full. This is a ghost town compared to what it used to be. It's wonderful what has happened to Ocean Grove lately, and the resurgence that we have had here, but we don't have the crowds that we used to have. We do have pretty good crowds on Saturday nights now.

**Ms. Newman:** What accounted for the decline in numbers? Transportation was better, so people went elsewhere?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, first of all, the Garden State Parkway came in. So instead of having to come down and stay overnight, people could come down for the day. And that started being a pattern rather than an exception. Then just getting back and forth became so easy - when everything had to depend on busses and trains, it was much different so people would stay. A trip was a big occasion. When cars were just part of the scene, then people could get out in just a matter of hours. And so that changed the complex in a way. Then everything started to evolve when television came in, and forms of entertainment, even forms of going to church changed. People could watch televangelists, which is unfortunate, but they could, and now I think they've learned, and they don't do that so much

anymore. Because televangelists dug their own grave. But you asked did we have very famous preachers early on. They weren't so much famous preachers as they were orators. Because there was no acoustical equipment in the auditorium holding ten thousand people, speakers had to be orators. This was everybody's manner of worship, but it was also what Ocean Grove was all about. So people came here to hear these great orators. And now we have probably more famous preachers than any other place in the country coming here. Now we have marvelous acoustics, we have more famous preachers, and we get the very finest preachers in the world. It's a real feather in somebody's cap to be invited to speak in Ocean Grove. Very prestigious. So we actually have more famous people now than we had then, but those people were more adored then than the people are now. People got involved. We had the same preachers year after year after year, because I guess you had to have the orators, and I guess you got to love them, and so they would come for a week just to hear one certain person, that type of thing.

**Ms. Rakita:** Another thing that was very important in growing up here was participation in the youth program. As a little kid I went to Thornley Chapel. And I remember something that nobody else remembers but I know I have not made it up. After Chapel, we used to have calisthenics in Auditorium Park, and I don't know, maybe it was only for a year or so. You were four years old when you went to Chapel, and then when you were twelve or thirteen you were too old to go and you went to the Youth Temple.

**Ms. Newman:** Was Thornley Chapel like Sunday school?

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes, but seven days a week, from nine to ten o'clock.

**Ms. Nichols:** And it's still going on. Except now it's only six days a week. We don't have it on Saturday.

**Ms. Rakita:** Then you went to the Young People's Temple which was six days a week. The point is, as a young person you were involved in the worship experience here in Ocean Grove. It was done at your level, which was very good. Then after Young People's was over, you could go to the beach, or do some of the other things that we did, maybe help your mother, or whatever.

**Ms. Newman:** So you would go to the Young People's Temple every day?

**Ms. Rakita:** Every day. And it wasn't something that you had to do, it was something that you wanted to do, because all your friends were there, and all your friends of the tent colony were there, and everybody that you knew. So that's what you did. It was nice in that there was always a lot to do. Even in those days there were shows and practices, and all that sort of thing. And as a young kid I can remember being on Mr. Hess's swimming team. It wasn't very good, but there were always things to do. So the tradition of a very extensive program for

young people in Ocean Grove is an old tradition, and this has been going on for a long time.

**Ms. Nichols:** This is very important because Ocean Grove has always been known as a place where you go to have your arteries hardened because all the people are very old. I think that conception is probably been mitigated a lot by the extensive youth programs that we have. Really, this is a very youthful town.

**Ms. Rakita:** Oh, yes, the people coming in include so many young families. People today assume that you can't invite anybody to come see you unless you have a private bedroom and even a private bathroom. That doesn't work in a tent. We had my mother and father and three children. Then my elderly aunt and uncle came down a great deal to visit. Other people came down; our grandmother came for at least a month, and my father always said the tent will expand for however many we were. And when I got married and had three children, it also expanded for us - but only for an occasional visit

**Ms. Newman:** What year was that?

**Ms. Rakita:** I got married in 1944. I brought my own family down here in the 1950s. It was my mother and my father and my sister in the tent, and then it was my husband and I and our two sons in the two front bunks, and for quite a few years my daughters slept on a beach chair because there wasn't anything else left to sleep on. Well, my middle boy slept on the floor, and we brought the playpen for my daughter to sleep in. When I was a teenager, I invited my boyfriend to come and he stayed. As my dad always said, the tent just expands. So then along about 1979 or 1980 I invited this friend of mine to come. It was a girlfriend. It was after my husband had died. She didn't have a private bedroom, and said, "Where am I going to get dressed?" She didn't have a private bathroom. She never came back! So you definitely have to have a certain kind of mindset to enjoy tent life.

**Ms. Nichols:** We had privacy. Our tent is large, and my mother had screens that went the full length of the tent, and curtains that went the width of the tent. So at night we'd each have our own bedroom because we had a screen on one side and a curtain on the other, and of course the tent on the other two, so we had privacy.

**Ms. Rakita:** My sister has brought up a very important point. There are two camps in Ocean Grove. There are people who sleep in the canvas, and people who sleep in the cottage. Never the twain shall meet. People who sleep in the canvas love to hear the wind snap the canvas, and they love to hear the squirrels run up and down the holes, and the rain on the canvas roof, and on a hot night, a sweet little breeze coming in the front. If you sleep in the tent, that's what you do. And then there are those that want a little more privacy so they choose to sleep in the cottage and this is much warmer in the cottage, so they came down here

early in June and stayed as late as they could in September. You got closer to whatever sanitary facilities there were as the years went by, and that's a very important point. I would say in the beginning most people slept in the tent, and they used the cottage more as a dressing room and as a dining room and as a place to listen to the radio. The kitchens were basically galley kitchens about six feet wide at most with just the stove and the sink and the ice box, so you had to use the cottage part on a rainy day to eat in, and most people used the cottage as their dining room, dressing room, and wardrobe, and so forth. And the beds and everything were in the tent part. But you have to be unselfconscious. It takes a certain mindset.

**Ms. Nichols:** Of course if you were six weeks old when you went there as I was, your mindset was built in.

**Ms. Newman:** Sounds like it would be a very happy place to grow up.

**Ms. Rakita:** Oh, very. Also we just didn't know there were financial problems. We didn't realize it. We were lucky. We weren't rich, but my father didn't lose his job during the Depression, and we had some money. My father was also a very fine editor for the John C. Winston Company, so he had a second source of income. We never felt, and I don't think anybody in the tent colony felt poor. Some people looked on us as being poor, but we didn't feel like it at all. It's interesting to me that there are still a lot of people left who are dying for this lifestyle. I have this wonderful friend whose been on the list for five years, but she just can't get a tent. And I'm hoping for her for next year. She loves the whole idea. She's an artist who also wrote a book. She's going to be a wonderful tenter; she's going to contribute a tremendous amount to Ocean Grove. She happens to be Roman Catholic, and that's a little bit of a problem. It's not a big problem; she would support the Camp Meeting Association. She might have a little bit of a problem. I know that I suggested when she was here that she go hear one of the famous speakers that happened to be there that Sunday, but she said she thought she'd go down to Spring Lake to that beautiful Catholic church. I respect her for that. But my point is, it's interesting to me now that although everybody has to have their own private bedroom and own private bath, there are still people who have the tent mindset.

**Ms. Nichols:** It's a fairly long waiting list for tents. It used to be ten years long, I don't think it is anymore. But even if you're on the waiting list, if you don't qualify, you won't get one anyway. There has to be some evidence of an interest in Ocean Grove just beyond having a place to go for the summer. Prayers, presence, gifts and service, are the basis of participation in the Methodist Church. So if you're never evident in a service, if you aren't in the choir, aren't in the Historical Society, things like that, if you haven't evidenced any real interest in Ocean Grove or in the mission of the Camp Meeting Association, somebody else who has would jump ahead of you on the waiting list. So when I say the waiting list is ten years long, I mean this could happen; we call somebody up and say,

"Well you're finally eligible to get a tent. Do you still want to be on the list?" And they say, "Oh, no, we bought a house four years ago." So the best candidates will weed themselves out. I don't really think it's ten years. But there is a waiting list and there are restrictions on how to get a tent. Not that everybody who lives in a tent does all those things because they don't.

**Ms. Newman:** Is the Camp Meeting Association ecumenical? Is there a Catholic service?

**Ms. Nichols:** Yes. Very seldom do we have Methodist preachers. In the fourteen Sundays that we have Sunday services, it could be that five or so might be Methodists, but they are heavily Presbyterian, and Baptist, and things like that. Tony Campola is a Baptist. The Bible Study teachers are almost anything. Just as long as they're good Bible Study teachers, it doesn't matter whether they're Methodist or not. So it's very ecumenical. As a matter of fact, there was a time when I was head of program, and at one point we wanted to see what type of person was coming to the camp meeting services on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. Where were they from? What church did they come from? That type of thing. We were blown away by the fact that most of them were Catholic. That was very unusual. But I took a one hundred and four questionnaires one year, and we might have twenty-five percent Methodist and twenty-five percent something else, but maybe thirty or thirty-five percent Catholic. Which we thought was wonderful. Never knew it before that. I guess because we have such fine preaching and people want to be exposed to it, and so it was an unusual thing to happen. So we have all kinds of people. A lot of Jewish people, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, and there are some non denominational, too. But mostly it's the ones that you are more familiar with. We have a very good smattering of all. When a preacher gets up in the auditorium and says it's nice to be talking to a bunch of Methodists, I think to myself, you're not, man, you really aren't. You're talking to the biggest smattering of denominations that you've ever spoken to before, but they don't know that.

**Ms. Newman:** Now you both are here just in the summers now, is that right?

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes. I owned a house for fourteen years, I'm a little bit sorry that I sold it, but not really. And I started to go down to Florida because my daughter had the children in Florida, and I wanted to see the grandchildren. And I went for three or four weeks, and then I went for six weeks, then I was staying with her for eight weeks, ten weeks. It wasn't fair, so I got my own place. My sister came down too. Going to Florida in the wintertime is a good thing for retirees. I'm a Floridian now, and I like Florida very much. And of course this is very common pattern here in Ocean Grove.

**Ms. Newman:** Snowbirds.

**Ms. Rakita:** Yes, a lot of them are very close in age to me, similar in history, too.

**Ms. Nichols:** When I was young I thought that things would never change, I thought Ocean Grove would always be closed on Sundays. And even though I like Monday through Saturday better than Monday through Sunday, what do you do on Sunday as a kid? But I never ever wanted it to change. Closing on Sundays was something that made Ocean Grove so unique that it was so apart from anything else that I would know, and I didn't want it to change. I was a member of the Board of Trustees when the decision was made to open the gates on Sundays. There were only two people on the board who voted against it, and I was one of them. The other was Walter Quigg, who was at that time our minister in Ocean Grove at St. Paul's church. Just being able to bring cars in here on Sunday has made a huge difference and made life in Ocean Grove so much different. It brought the world into Ocean Grove.

**Ms. Newman:** For the better, the worse, or both?

**Ms. Nichols:** Well, it's according to what standpoint - it's all of the above. The world came into Ocean Grove. Now I am so much of a traditionalist that I don't like that. But still, the world goes on, and so the problems of the world also came into Ocean Grove. Actually, they're beginning to leave now, which is kind of funny. I mean for a while Ocean Pathway used to be drunk haven, but it isn't anymore. That type of thing.

**Ms. Newman:** That was because of the institutionalization?

**Ms. Nichols:** Right. And when the price of housing went up, the whole flavor of Ocean Grove changed in a way because people were spending money on their houses instead of just living in them. I mean, many of the houses in Ocean Grove were ramshackle thirty years ago. There were very few houses that you would walk by and say, "Oh, isn't that beautiful." Today one is more beautiful than the other because people have finally been willing to spend money on their houses, and they're just making mansions out of them, and they're beautiful, beautiful homes. So that has made a huge change in Ocean Grove. I think the Historical Society has made a huge change in Ocean Grove because they've been very protective of our history. The Camp Meeting Association has not been. If it hadn't been for the Historical Society, practically all of our heritage probably would have been thrown in the trash. But the Historical Society saved everything, and they also gave us all a new sense of the historicity of Ocean Grove and the appreciation of the history and the need to preserve the traditions of Ocean Grove. I think the Beautification Committee has done an awful lot toward making people have more pride in the way Ocean Grove looks and people are buying into it. They have made the grounds of Ocean Grove absolutely spectacular. I think the whole thing possibly started with the restoration of the Auditorium, which was falling apart. And millions of dollars were spent on that restoration and then it kind of spread, almost like a pebble in a pond. People started fixing up. Now, I don't get the impression that people are in competition with one another, you know, "He did his house, so I've got to do mine better." I don't get that

impression at all. I just get the impression that people are now taking great pride in their homes. I think an awful lot of people have bought their homes in Ocean Grove as their eventual retirement home, and so they're really doing a number on it, and that type of thing has changed quite a bit. It used to be that the homes in Ocean Grove were really just kind of summer shacks, and people came down for the summer, and then in the fall they'd close the front door and then they went home, but that's no longer true. Some of the houses in Ocean Grove are spectacular. They're on a par, I think with almost any other town.

**Ms. Rakita:** And I think that has spilled over to the tents. The large majority of the tents now are beautifully kept up. People have made wonderful interior improvements in the kitchens and the bathrooms. Painting, flowers, decoration, antiques. I mean it, there are thousands of dollars worth of antiques right in the tents. Old children's toys, kitchen equipment. Old kitchen equipment is very big now: wooden handled kitchen equipment, and oak furniture, gorgeous oak furniture, original wicker. So people are buying these lovely Victorians and fixing them up. People are also taking tremendous amount of pride in their tents. This was not true as I grew up. When I grew up, the tent was pretty much four cots, a bed, and a steamer trunk. There wasn't too much of interest. My mother was very unique in that she had lovely flowers in front of her tent; other people did not.

**Ms. Newman:** But now virtually all of the tents have them.

**Ms. Rakita:** Almost everybody has gorgeous flowers in front of their tents, if they don't they stick out like a sore thumb. Because there is this waiting list, people are keeping their tents for much longer periods of time.

**Ms. Newman:** Once you rent a tent, it is yours to keep until you relinquish it, right?

**Ms. Nichols:** Generally speaking, yes. If you do something awful, and we have had a few cases where some people have been thrown out of their tents for misconduct, but for the most part, once you get a tent, it's yours until you say you don't want it anymore. We've been in the same tent for seventy-one years. So that's a record. Actually we have been in tenting since the beginning. Our great-grandmother began the tradition, so we have a very long history of tenting. There is another family who has been in tenting a very long time who lives on Bath Avenue, but I can't remember the name. They haven't been in continuous residence, but they've been in tenting as long as we have.

**Ms. Newman:** Let me go back to that question I posed at first - is it like today as you pictured it when you were young, or have things evolved differently?

**Ms. Rakita:** Specifically, we've mentioned the things that changed in Ocean Grove. Most all have been, now in the year 2000, wonderful. They've been for the best. But as a young person, you don't look at yourself, or what's going to

happen. I never would have guessed as a teenager that at age forty-two I would take a full-time job. I mean that was not something my mother did, and I never expected to do that. I expected that I would marry, have a family, and it never occurred to me that I would have an interest on my part of doing something else besides being a housewife. I could never have guessed that.

**Ms. Newman:** What kind of work did you do?

**Ms. Rakita:** I taught school, which I never expected that I would do. I don't think it's possible to say things turned out the way you thought they would, because there have been such enormous changes. I grew up in the industrial revolution, and then we had the communications revolution, and now we're into the next one. Everything's moved so fast.

**Ms. Nichols:** I grew up in a time when you had to wear your clothes to the beach, and go to the bathhouse in order to change into your bathing suit. That has been a huge change. You know, now you put your bathing suit on in your house and you walk down to the beach in your bathing suit. Forty years ago, if a man tried to walk through Ocean Grove with shorts on and no top, the police would have stopped him, taken him in, and told him to put on his top. I still go for that. I hate these big bellied men wearing only bathing trunks walking down Main Avenue in Ocean Grove. I think they look ugly and it's not respectful to the town. But on the other hand, it's kind of nice for the kids to be able to put their bathing suits on at the house and go to the beach instead of having to tramp all the way down, go to the locker, and go through that horrible tunnel to get on the beach. That type of thing.

**Ms. Rakita:** That's something that new people don't really appreciate. There still is a tunnel underneath the boardwalk. Now it's probably all filled up with sand, and I fully expect someday when somebody parks down there on the north end parking lot, the land is going to get wet, and their car is going to fall into the tunnel. But we had to take our towel and our suit and go into the bathhouse, change our clothes, and then we had a long flight of steps down, because this was a real tunnel. You weren't allowed to walk in your bathing suit across the boardwalk onto the beach. The bathhouse is here, and the ocean is there, and the boardwalk is there, so we built a tunnel underneath. This tunnel is dank and dark and wet, and it kind of always had a funny smell to it. It also had a curve, and I didn't like that. I was a little kid, and I went down the whole flight of stairs and I walked in the dark tunnel, and then got to the curve, and there was one place where you couldn't see until you went around, and then you could see the light at the other end. And then you would walk real fast and go up the steps again and then you were on the beach. But that's how strict it was. And it was the same thing at the south end. They had a tunnel too. You can't go across the boardwalk in your bathing suit. The only exception to that rule was when the bathhouses weren't open in early June and late September; you were allowed to put your bathing suit on and what we call a T-shirt, and walk to the beach. The

beach has always cost a little something. Wasn't it five dollars during the Depression? Children didn't pay anything. It always cost fifteen cents to go to the pool.

**Ms. Nichols:** Eighteen cents. When I was working there it was eighteen cents.

**Ms. Rakita:** That was in addition to what you paid for the season bath house ticket of five dollars which was yours for the whole summer. You had a key, you could keep towels there, you could keep an extra suit there, you could keep the beach chair there. Some of them were double houses, and people kept a lot of stuff in double houses. But we had a house that was very nice because it was in the sunlight. It dried out. If it got wet or something, it dried out because the sun hit it. That was very nice. We got that house and we had that house for years.

**Ms. Newman:** Well, these are wonderful memories, thank you very much, I thank both of you very much.