



Interview with Robert Wilcox

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

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Oceanport, NJ
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**Mr. Robert Wilcox with his '89
Firebird in 1998**

Ms. Higgins: Where were you born?

Mr. Wilcox: I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, and lived in my earlier years in Springfield. But at an early age, I came down here, always on visits. Sometimes I even went to school down here. I attended the elementary school in North Long Branch. The principal there was Conrow, who now has a school named after her in Long Branch. From that time on, whenever the opportunity presented itself, I was down here. I would come either by train, or boat, or whatever. My grandparents were here, and that was my mother's home. And I got to love this place...the environment, everything, and the salt-air mostly. The men folks, including my grandfather, two of my uncles, and several of my other relatives, gained their total income, the means of raising and educating their families from this river and its products. We gathered from time to time down at what my uncle called his oyster house. And I heard a lot of talk about the river, and the names of the various parts of the river. And I heard about their success or lack of it in catching the fish and shellfish, or whatever was income producing at the time.

Ms. Higgins: Would the shellfish be marketed locally?

Mr. Wilcox: Yes. Largely it would consist of cottage owners along the shore sending their chauffeurs over to buy the products. Also at that time, they would

put certain products such as eels and other fish in boxes that they would build themselves. And they would put a label on it and call the express office, which would send a truck down and pick it up.

Ms. Higgins: Down from where?

Mr. Wilcox: From the Long Branch station depot of the NY and Long Branch Railroad. It was the Adams Express Company. I remember the label, which had a fish on it. It would then go to Fulton Fish Market in New York. These river men never knew what price it would bring or what income would result until they got word back from the market. Everything in those days was largely a matter of a man's word being his bond. So there was a lot of trust involved.

Ms. Higgins: Did the fish go up by train?

Mr. Wilcox: Yes. Frank Wilcox, an uncle of my father, was the express agent for Adams Express. The Express company was an integral part of the whole train operation. Their employees were responsible for the handling and shipment of all materials by train. Uncle Frank lived on Branchport Avenue and raised a big family. And I have his genealogy right there in my desk.

Ms. Higgins: Where did your people originally come from? What was your mother's maiden name?

Mr. Wilcox: My mother's maiden name was Riddle. The cross-hatched property on the plans that I showed you was her homestead.

Ms. Higgins: The Riddles came from where?

Mr. Wilcox: Grandma Riddle was believed to be from Eatontown.

Ms. Higgins: (Laughter) I was thinking of Ireland, Germany, or England. Eatontown, ok!

Mr. Wilcox: Her maiden name was Lane.

Ms. Higgins: Your people have been here a long time!

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, yes. Both families. Riddle is maternal, and Wilcox is paternal.

Ms. Higgins: When did you actually move down here?

Mr. Wilcox: I didn't move down here permanently until my senior year in high school. But I spent summers and winter holidays here, and time in the North Long Branch school. But I half lived with my grandparents. My father's business took him all over the northeast.

Ms. Higgins: What business was your father in?

Mr. Wilcox: He was a diner manager and operator. He worked for what they called the Club Diner Corporation. When they would start a diner in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, or Long Island; they would have real estate people pick out the site for them and appraise it. They would establish a diner there, and they put him in it to run it until it got "off the ground." Then he would go to another place. It was Williamsport, Pennsylvania; Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania; Newark, New Jersey; and Great Neck, Long Island, etc.

Ms. Higgins: So he traveled a lot.

Mr. Wilcox: I wouldn't say traveled a lot, but he changed residences a lot.

Ms. Higgins: Did your family go as a group?

Mr. Wilcox: My mother went with my dad, but as I got older, I was by myself.

Ms. Higgins: What was the major appeal of the Jersey shore for you as a young or middle-aged boy?

Mr. Wilcox: The people and the river. And I just absolutely loved being in a boat of any kind.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever have a sailboat?

Mr. Wilcox: I had all kinds of boats. I was a charter member of the Shrewsbury Sailing Club.

Ms. Higgins: Is that the River Rats now?

Mr. Wilcox: No, that's Fairhaven.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever belong to the Monmouth Yacht Club?

Mr. Wilcox: No. I belonged to the Monmouth Ice Boat Club.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about ice boating.

Mr. Wilcox: Well, those men that worked on the river in my family, many of them were active in ice boating. Records of their participation are included in a book published by Warren Ayres and Byron Briggs, and it's called *Shrewsbury River Memoirs*. The records of their participation, the results of races they sailed in, and the boats that they simply crewed on are all included in that book.

Ms. Higgins: Is that the Ayres family from Little Silver and Red Bank?

Mr. Wilcox: It's Ayres, but there is more than one family of Ayres, I am sure. Warren Ayres and Byron Briggs both passed away, some time ago. But Warren's son, until recently, had some kind of job at Monmouth University, as a comptroller or something similar.

Ms. Higgins: Do you think winters were colder years ago?

Mr. Wilcox: I had a diary that was loaned to me by Chick Trafford, from Manasquan. It was a personal diary of a land surveyor in Eatontown, and it covered the years from 1879 to 1882. It was just three years, but every day in the diary, he was very careful to include the weather, and the way it appeared to him. If he was to go out and make a survey, then the weather was an item to consider. The weather was also an item if he couldn't go out, he would stay home and write deed descriptions.

Ms. Higgins: Did he think it was colder?

Mr. Wilcox: No. Considering the means of transportation and communication in those days, I don't think there has been any great change at all. Even from the days that I first started ice boating, sailing, racing and building boats, the type of winter we had was of paramount importance to me. And it is important to even the few kids that are still interested in ice boats. It's about the same today as it was then. Many periods of three to four years, we had mild winters. We might not get on the ice once during a whole winter, or on bearable ice. Cap Rice used to say some of them would go out when the ice wouldn't hold a seagull.

Ms. Higgins: When you were a teenager here where would you go for entertainment when you weren't out on the water in your boat?

Mr. Wilcox: Moving pictures in Long Branch would be the number one place. Depending on the season; the other place would be the Long Branch pier. They had a building out on the pier where they always had dance bands, etc. Toward the end of that period, it drifted into marathon dancing. Some of the participants in the marathon dancing are still in Long Branch.

Ms. Higgins: Well, that's pretty good. I hadn't known that.

Mr. Wilcox: Red Skelton, the comedian, was one of the entertainers at that time. In fact, I think he got his start right here in Long Branch.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember the name of the club out on the pier?

Mr. Wilcox: No.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember when it came down?

Mr. Wilcox: No. So far as it being a dance hall, that stopped a long time ago, about the beginning of the Depression, in the middle 1930s.

Ms. Higgins: Can you give us any of your recollections about the Depression?

Mr. Wilcox: I had started as an engineer with the old New Jersey State Highway Department, which is now the Department of Transportation, NJDOT. I was working with that department; I had started there in 1928. All during the Depression, I was fortunate enough to draw a paycheck. I got paid, and I worked right on through it. But many of the men I worked with weren't so fortunate. I remember that they had an arrangement with the WPA, where some of these employees with us were on a schedule where they would work two weeks, and then they would be off two weeks. There was enough income from that so they could keep their families together, I presume. All of them did that I was acquainted with.

Ms. Higgins: Many of the people I interview have a lot of comments about the current state of transportation in New Jersey. Would you care to contrast between the transportation in the 1920s and 1930s and the transportation now? Or maybe what we could have done differently?

Mr. Wilcox: I worked with the department for forty-three years, and I didn't retire until 1972. Up until that time, everything was centered on new roads and extensions of old roads. But that was just about the time when they started thinking that instead of building more new roads, even though the old ones sometimes seemed inadequate, they had to start spending more money on improving the existing facilities, especially in the area of bridges. So from then until now, that has been the direction that they are moving in. And it's taking an awful lot of funding to carry out a program of maintenance, but they seem to be doing it successfully.

Ms. Higgins: The Red Bank bridge is finished now.

Mr. Wilcox: Yes, right. Well, there is another example of it. That thing was built a long time ago.

Ms. Higgins: Do you think we should put more emphasis on the rail service? A lot of people used to get around on the trolley and the train.

Mr. Wilcox: There has to be an encouragement for development of a means of transportation other than automobile. They have already begun that with the electrification of our lines here.

Ms. Higgins: How about water transportation?

Mr. Wilcox: Well, water transportation is helping a whole lot. Of course the county is going ahead with the plans for the new terminal at Belford, and that will be an added help. I wish them success, but there are a lot of people who don't think it will really succeed. It doesn't make any difference whether it's boats, trains, or buses. No matter what means of transportation you are talking about, it always gets back to parking and access.

Ms. Higgins: You said you used to go to the movies. Do you remember any movies you particularly liked in the old days? One interviewee said the first movie he ever saw was *Gone with the Wind*, and he said it has been all down hill since then.

Mr. Wilcox: Yes, that's right. I agree with that. I used to be a cowboy fan. I liked Tom Mix and William Farnum and even Gene Autrey toward the end. There was also Roy Rogers and his wife.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember any restaurants that you would visit when you all went out to dinner sometimes?

Mr. Wilcox: Earlier in my youth, I wasn't in the social strata that would go out to restaurants much. But the partying group, as they would refer to them today, would go to seafood restaurants. There was one right across the river, on property that you can see from here. Green Gables was the name. And, of course, let's not forget Price's Hotel, by the bridge.

Ms. Higgins: What time frame was that popular? And which bridge, this one out here?

Mr. Wilcox: It was always known as the Pleasure Bay Bridge.

Ms. Higgins: Mr. Wilcox, could you tell us why your family always referred to this particular peninsula as Slocum's Island?

Mr. Wilcox: What was your question prior to mentioning about Slocum's Island?

Ms. Higgins: I asked about the Price's Hotel. I hadn't heard of that. When did it go away?

Mr. Wilcox: Price's Hotel burned around 1950.

Ms. Higgins: It was an institution then, right? I imagine Green Gables restaurant sold seafood that your family might have caught?

Mr. Wilcox: Price's did, and so did Green Gables. And mostly eels and crabs, and at the beginning, oysters.

Ms. Higgins: Why at the beginning?

Mr. Wilcox: Oysters were a real delicacy. Shrewsbury River oysters were famous world-wide. So Red Bank always referred to their river as the North Shrewsbury River. One of the results of that is the Ice Boat Club in Red Bank is called the North Shrewsbury Ice Boat Club.

Ms. Higgins: Is it on the Shrewsbury?

Mr. Wilcox: No, it's on the Navesink. By action of the State's Economic Development and Conservation Commission, they changed the name. And that was somewhere around the 1970s, I guess. From then on, the Red Bank River was the Navesink River, and our river was the Shrewsbury River.

Ms. Higgins: What happened to the oysters?

Mr. Wilcox: The same thing that happened in other places. Some disease got into them and wiped them out. The same thing happened in Delaware Bay, and it's beginning in Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

Ms. Higgins: Are oysters relatively fragile?

Mr. Wilcox: No, but there is a mite that gets into them. Scientists can tell you more about it.

Ms. Higgins: But there was no question about the purity of the fish, or if there was, when did it occur? When did you begin to feel that the shellfish were not clean enough to eat?

Mr. Wilcox: When they were no longer there to be tonged.

Ms. Higgins: Tonged?

Mr. Wilcox: Yes, big oyster tongs were used.

Ms. Higgins: How about the clams, was there any clam digging out here?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, yes. There still are soft clams and hard clams, but they are not legally harvested in most of the Shrewsbury and Navesink. They cannot harvest them because of the water quality. They have done all kinds of things to overcome that. They have taken seed shellfish that they catch in these two rivers, take them down to Barnegat Bay into water that is not polluted, plant them, let them grow, harvest them, and then bring them back here. Then they subject them to ultraviolet rays, or some means that I am not familiar with, removing any pollution that might be there.

Ms. Higgins: Before we leave the subject of when you were very young, could you share with us some of your memories of school time?

Mr. Wilcox: The homestead was on Riddle Avenue, and I was going to the Church Street School in North Long Branch. And I remember that I walked the entire distance.

Ms. Higgins: How many miles would that be?

Mr. Wilcox: A couple. It is about a mile from the Riddle Avenue homestead up to Florence and Atlantic, and then about a mile from there to North Long Branch.

Ms. Higgins: And when you got there, how many children would be there? Was it a one-room schoolroom?

Mr. Wilcox: No, they were in classes. I attended the fourth and seventh grades over there. Many of my classmates went on to bigger things. And I didn't do so bad myself.

Ms. Higgins: What did you do? What did you go on to?

Mr. Wilcox: Highway construction, and outdoors most of the time. Toward the end of my employment, I was in an office in Metuchen. I always had a state car for transportation. Then I found out where the money was, and I had an opportunity to go into Trenton. I commuted every day from 1967 to 1972, when I retired. The first four years of it, I had a state car. The last year I traveled in my own car, when they started looking at carpools and that sort of thing.

Ms. Higgins: Were you involved in the planning and construction of the Turnpike and Garden State Parkway?

Mr. Wilcox: No, I missed that. Many of the people that I worked with went there, but it was mostly upper level, that is a higher level than myself.

Ms. Higgins: When we moved down here, Route 35 and Route 36 were just two-lane roads. That was in the 1950s. And then all of a sudden, everything had six lanes. Good job!

Mr. Wilcox: That was during the time when I was in Trenton. No, that was before I went to Trenton. But I was assisting with the public hearings. I remember hearings that were conducted in the fire house in Belford, and we were getting ready to put in a center divider. Also the same thing happened in the hearing that we conducted in Middletown, for a center barrier there. And the people were very much against that. The ones that were most against it were business people on the wrong side of the road. Their customers would have to go to the next u-turn

and come back. But the way it has worked out, that was the only way to go with what pavement and what right-of-way they had to work with.

Ms. Higgins: Would you care to comment on the changes you have seen in Monmouth County over the past many years?

Mr. Wilcox: The only thing I can think of is the great expansion in the health care facilities and the facilities for senior citizens.

Ms. Higgins: When you needed medical care when you were growing up and as a young man, where would you go from here?

Mr. Wilcox: Down on Riddle Avenue, it was always Dr. Chasey.

Ms. Higgins: Did he make house calls?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, certainly! That was a given. They used to call them homeopathic doctors. There were very few specialists then. Now everybody is a specialist.

Ms. Higgins: It's hard to find a general practitioner.

Mr. Wilcox: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: Tell me about some of the milestones in your life. We talked about getting a job at the highway department, and you were too young for World War I and probably too old for World War II, right?

Mr. Wilcox: I was in the United States Army for three and a half years during World War II, and I never left the country. I was a little bit older then. I used to go in the mess hall or into the latrine, and they would call me grandpa. And I wasn't that old, I was only in my thirties.

Ms. Higgins: Were you drafted?

Mr. Wilcox: No, I enlisted.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember any of your uncles or older friends who might have served in World War I?

Mr. Wilcox: Yes, one of my mother's brothers did, and I referred to him as Uncle George. He was in the Navy in the submarine service. He never went overseas either. He trained at Newport, Rhode Island. I still have photos of him in his diving suit in the submarine service. They dove to recover the spent torpedoes. His mother, my grandmother, had him late in life. So when we went anywhere together, there wasn't too much difference in our ages. And he would say to me, "Robert, please don't call me your uncle."

Ms. Higgins: Do you have any recollections of Fort Monmouth?

Mr. Wilcox: That's where I enlisted, that's where I served. I enlisted over there, and I had taken engineering drafting at Newark Tech. I didn't go to college, but I had one year of engineering at Newark Tech, which is what they called it in those days. It is Newark Technical School, or New Jersey Institute of Technology, now. There I learned surveying under an excellent teacher by the name of Barbehenn. And I took what they called engineering drawing then and surveying, of course. There was also a compulsory English, which I didn't finish. But this is about the Jersey shore and is not about me, as I understand it.

Ms. Higgins: Well, we feel that the people who made the Jersey shore "are" the Jersey shore. So we are interested in your life as well. Do you have any memories of the Morro Castle catastrophe?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, yes, I remember the Morro Castle thing. And I remember the storm that we had when that was all going on, when the Morro Castle was being towed from Manasquan Inlet toward New York, when it broke lose and came ashore right off the Asbury Park convention hall. It was less than 200 yards off the convention hall.

Ms. Higgins: Did you go see it?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, yes, everybody went to see it and took pictures of it. One of the strangest things about it was you would get in your car and drive down Ocean Avenue, and you would make those turns into Loch Arbor and Allenhurst. Then all of a sudden, here's this ship that looked like it was almost in front of you. And it was so in close to shore, and you could see it above the houses and above everything. It was strange!

Ms. Higgins: And yet even though it was so close, there was big loss of life.

Mr. Wilcox: There was a big loss of life from people jumping off the stern with or without life jackets. They were mostly tourists and a lot of them elderly. When I first went to Elizabeth and was attending Newark Tech to learn surveying at night, I got my first job with Grassman & Kreh Consulting Engineers. Their office manager was the type that walks around with all the keys to the building on his belt. And he was there from day one, and he knew everything about the business. He was kind to me and took me under his wing, and he taught me how to use logarithms and slide rules, which were the forerunners of calculators. He was so good to me and prepared me, and he got me pay raises and everything else. He never took a vacation until that summer. He finally took his family, got on the Morro Castle, and they were on the Morro Castle when it came aground. Many went overboard off the stern, and he was the only one in his family that didn't make it to shore.

Ms. Higgins: There was a big surf, was there not?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh yes. We had a howling, northeast storm when all that was going on.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever take your sailboats outside?

Mr. Wilcox: No, it was mostly river sailing.

Ms. Higgins: Did they ever have any scows down here?

Mr. Wilcox: That's a little thing that's in my book a little bit. The book...well I shouldn't get into this.

Ms. Higgins: Go ahead.

Mr. Wilcox: I will be everlastingly grateful to Ayres and Briggs for putting that book together, the *Shrewsbury River Memoirs*. But it omitted so many things about boats on the river. When I was growing up, the principal sporting activity on the river in sailing was done out of the Rumson Country Club. They had a whole fleet of scows, center board scows.

Ms. Higgins: 'E' scows or 'M' scows?

Mr. Wilcox: The big ones, those are the 'E' scows. You have to differentiate between the center board scows and the bilge board scows. But they had center board scows, and most of them were built by Jerolaman's Boat Works, in Monmouth Beach.

Ms. Higgins: So did you sail scows?

Mr. Wilcox: No. I crewed on one just one time. The *Shrewsbury River Memoirs* had a picture of one of them finishing a race right out here in front of this place.

Ms. Higgins: How was it rigged? Did it have a lot of sail?

Mr. Wilcox: Just a jib and main sail, that's all. The Rumson Club scows, as I remember, flew spinnakers.

Ms. Higgins: Do you have any comments on the boat builders in Highlands? The Jersey skiff, that was not a sailboat, was it?

Mr. Wilcox: There has been so much play on that title. The New Jersey Speed Skiff was designed by Harold Seamen, right here on this river at Branchport. The Long Branch Ice Boat & Yacht Club was instrumental in getting it recognized by the American Power Boat Association as a racing class. Our club, the Long

Branch Ice Boat & Yacht Club, conducted inboard and outboard races right here. The course is right out in front here. I laid it out, and it was a mile around for inboard and outboards both. Of course the outboards attracted most of the attention.

Ms. Higgins: Mr. Wilcox has a daughter, who went to the University of New Hampshire. She received her undergraduate degree in English, and then went to Michigan State and got a masters degree in English. Tell us more about your family. How did you and your wife meet? Did you meet here in Monmouth County?

Mr. Wilcox: We met at Fort Monmouth, while I was in the Army as a drafting specialist. They didn't know too much about what a draftsman did, but I had a drafting room. I had three employees working for me, and that was all. I was in charge of the drafting room for the officer's school, which was differentiated from the enlisted men's school. My wife was executive secretary to the commandant of the officer's school. And that's how we met. The commandant intercepted one of my calls to her, which caused her a great deal of embarrassment. (Laughter) She was the greatest thing that ever happened to me! What a woman! After we had been married over thirty-three years, she was stricken with a massive coronary. And I never remarried.

Ms. Higgins: She must have been quite young.

Mr. Wilcox: She was twelve years younger than I. We had one daughter, and two sons. One son is my landlord. My wife and I built that part of the house, and we raised the three children in it.

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

Mr. Wilcox: Susan. And she was a Cornish, and I have all the genealogy on her family, all the way back to 1623.

Ms. Higgins: What would you like to tell people that are going to be listening to or reading this interview in fifty or seventy years?

Mr. Wilcox: I have a proclamation to me. You had to admire and respect my family because of what they had accomplished with so little to work with, and how much they enjoyed life, and how they were able to raise big families. You can't go anywhere without finding some of them, especially in Monmouth County. But I don't have any wishes for people to think of me. The mayor before the one that issued that proclamation came after Mayor Tommy Cavanaugh, who is now a Superior Court Judge in Monmouth County. He issued a proclamation similar to that, and for the same purpose.

Ms. Higgins: This proclamation is for a Lifetime Achievement Award for Volunteerism given to Mr. Wilcox.

Mr. Wilcox: I was the recipient of the Mayor's Lifetime Achievement Award for Volunteerism, and that was from the previous Mayor, Tommy Cavanaugh. He created that thing, and I was the first selected to receive it.

Ms. Higgins: Mr. Wilcox, I think people have a lot of respect, regard and admiration for you, as well. Oceanport is a most lovely town, and I see you have had a big part in it.

Mr. Wilcox: I was President of Shore Regional Board of Education. I had a big hand in the selection of the site and the construction of the building. I was president of that board during the first year of operation. Peter Cooper in West Long Branch was president when we dedicated the building in September of 1962. I took over when they elected the new president in February of 1963. So I had the term the last of 1963 and the first of 1964. But in doing that, I never had a chance to award the diplomas to the graduating class. I missed that.

Ms. Higgins: When you were a youngster coming down from Massachusetts, how would you get into Monmouth County? How did you get down to this area?

Mr. Wilcox: I was living in White Plains about eight of those years, and we used to ride the railroad, which is called the Westchester & Boston Railroad. Most people rode the New York Central from White Plains into New York, but we rode the Westchester & Boston. And you had to get off and get on the el or the subway, down to 23rd Street, where the boats docked. We had four steamboats operating out of here, *Tom Patten*, *Mary Patten*, *Elberon*, and the *Little Silver*. Red Bank had two boats, the *Albertina* and the *Seabird*.

Ms. Higgins: So you came down by steamboat?

Mr. Wilcox: Yes, and then I got on the trolley car and got off at 2nd Avenue & Broadway in Long Branch. Then I got another trolley car that took us from there back to Pleasure Bay. We got off at Pleasure Bay and walked down Florence Avenue and Patten Avenue to Riddle Avenue. That homestead was on Riddle Avenue, named so by Joe Riddle, on the south side of the street. Holmes Riddle, his brother, built on the north side of the street. Holmes raised a lot of boys and Joe raised a lot of girls. The boys from Holmes' side of the road married Irish maids, who worked in the cottages on the beach. There was Teresa, Catherine, Cecelia, and I don't remember the other one. Joe Riddle had all girls, and they married all kinds of guys, including some Wilcoxes. I told you about the express agent at Long Branch who was an uncle of my father.

Ms. Higgins: Yes.

Mr. Wilcox: He brought Robert L. Wilcox, my uncle, and his brother Arthur Vinton Wilcox from Chatham, New York down here to work for him in the express business for the summer. And that's how both of them got acquainted with Riddle girls. So the two brothers married two sisters: Lottie and Ella married Art and Rob. And this goes on and on.

Ms. Higgins: We can talk a little bit more about some of the things here in Monmouth County in general, and in Oceanport. Would you tell us about the Pleasure Bay Bridge?

Mr. Wilcox: Pleasure Bay Bridge was a swing span, and it was in practically the same location as the present bridge. The span was busy opening with the Patten Line running passenger and cargo service back and forth to New York. The local kids, including me, loved to get on the bridge when there was a boat coming up the river. And we would ride the swing span, and go out with it. You could see firsthand the crew and the passengers on the boat. And of course, we were always fishing in the summer for crabs, and snapper blues.

Ms. Higgins: From the bridge?

Mr. Wilcox: From the bridge.

Ms. Higgins: Where did the Patten Line go from...it went into New York?

Mr. Wilcox: It left from the 23rd Street Pier at New York and went to Pleasure Bay Pier at Long Branch. It would pick up passengers at Battery Park on the way down. I'm not sure about all of them, but the Red Bank boats, which ran about the same time, there were two of them. They were the *Albertina* and the other name escapes me now. The four boats here were the *Mary Patten*, the *Tom Patten*, *Elberon*, and *Little Silver*. The Tom didn't run here very long, and it was sold to Maryland and ran ferry service from the eastern shore to Baltimore.

Ms. Higgins: How many people would it carry? How big are these boats?

Mr. Wilcox: I think about 120-150 feet, or somewhere around that.

Ms. Higgins: Why did they stop this service? It seemed like a very efficient way to take people into New York. Why did they all stop?

Mr. Wilcox: I think trucks and trains really ran them out of business, especially the trucks. They would have to truck the cargo to the boat and then truck it to the vendor on the shore, so there was extra handling and time. It wasn't a quick trip, but I don't suppose trains were either.

Ms. Higgins: When did they cease?

Mr. Wilcox: They ran as late as about 1930. There were two boats from Keansburg that ran in here, and they were the last ones. Two of the boats, I think one was the *Mary Patten* and the other was one of the Keansburg boats, spent their last days just the other side of the bridge. Then the Depression in the 1930s came, and local people hacked at them to get the lumber for firewood. In fact, at our boat club, the gavel and its base were made by a club member out of a piece of oak off the paddle wheel of the *Mary*. And that gavel may still be in use. I haven't seen it lately, but it still might be around. I rode the boat with my parents when we were living in White Plains, New York. We rode the Westchester & Boston Railroad into New York. And one time we rode the Red Bank boat in, and it was an all day trip. These boats made stops at Atlantic Highlands, at Bown's Dock, in Fairhaven, and went into Red Bank. You got off the boats at Red Bank, got on the trolley car, came by trolley from Red Bank to here, and then walked from Pleasure Bay Park down to Riddle Town, which is right across the river. And that was at least a twelve-hour trip, I know. It took from early morning until late afternoon, and it was extremely tiring.

Ms. Higgins: It makes the Garden State Parkway not look so bad, right? When did the turnpike come in? I am thinking about the competition between the truckers and the boating people.

Mr. Wilcox: Well, when the turnpike first began, it was a state project. It was done by our highway department. And our highway department was working on taxpayer money, which was limited then as it is now. And it reached a point where none of it had been built yet, and they saw what funding was needed, so they created the Turnpike Commission. And they worked with the government bonds.

Ms. Higgins: How did the New Jersey Turnpike change Monmouth County?

Mr. Wilcox: Oh, the turnpike and the parkway just caused a really great boom, not only in Monmouth County, but more so in Ocean and points south. The Ocean County people could buy \$10,000 house and then they could commute to work on the Garden State Parkway. And they would be in the City and North Jersey in an hour or less.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us, please, your recollections of the lifesaving service.

Mr. Wilcox: My grandfather, Joe Riddle, lived on Riddle Avenue. His brother, Holmes, lived across the street. They both raised big families, and one family was boys and one family was girls. And never the twain should mix! I could go on and on with this. At that time, the need for coastal protection and lifesaving service became necessary. So the United States created the United States Lifesaving Service. They built lifesaving stations at regular intervals along the shore from Sandy Hook to Cape May.

Ms. Higgins: This was in about what year?

Mr. Wilcox: Both my grandfather and his brother began their work in 1887. The lifesaving service was from 1887 to 1925, but I don't think that either one of them was still working in the lifesaving service in 1925. But maybe they worked up until 1920 or so.

Ms. Higgins: Was that a job, or was it like the volunteer fire department?

Mr. Wilcox: No, it was a paid job. And I don't think the pay was much. They worked shifts, so that there was a required number of men available around the clock. These shifts ran for either a week or two weeks, and they lived at the station during that time.

Ms. Higgins: Where are the stations?

Mr. Wilcox: One station was at Sandy Hook, and that was called the Spermacetti Cove Station; then coming south, the next one was at Sea Bright. Then there was one at Monmouth Beach. I think there were others in between at one time, but those were the first and main ones. The Sandy Hook Station is still there, and it has been taken over by the federal government, and it has been all fixed up. I don't know if it is used by employees of the government or not.

Ms. Higgins: Was your grandfather's organization a Monmouth County organization, a Coastal one, or did it have state backing?

Mr. Wilcox: His organization was known at the U.S. Life Saving Service. My grandfather is buried in the cemetery at West Long Branch. His stone was bought and paid for by the Surfman's Mutual Benefit Association. I suppose that was a forerunner of our unions.

Ms. Higgins: Who was saved by the various stations?

Mr. Wilcox: Boats that came from foreign countries and broke up in the storms, for the most part. In a letter to headquarters, my uncle got the names of some of the wrecks that my grandfather worked on. One of them was the *Emma K. Buckley*, but then south of here, a boat called the *New Era* went down. And you have heard about that, probably. A large number of people lost their lives, and they are buried in the old First Church cemetery in a mass grave with a huge monument, which is still there.

Ms. Higgins: Would you please comment on the relationship of your grandparents, your parents, and yourself to this river.

Mr. Wilcox: All the men on the river, that's all they did. They harvested their shellfish almost year-round. Even in the wintertime, they dug clams by cutting

slots through the ice. In the wintertime when he couldn't work, my uncle sat backwards on a chair and knitted his own nets, which they call fykes. And I remember in the spring when I was going to school, he got me out of bed at four o'clock in the morning, and I got in the boat with him and went out. He had eighteen fykes and sixty eel pots set down on the river. We emptied those into our boat and brought them back, and then I would go to school after a second breakfast. But that's all that generation did. And then some of the next generation continued working on the water. But every year, there were fewer river men. A few of the people around here were working in town. But the bulk of them were people who in the wintertime, when the cottages all along the beach were empty, maintained those places. They did all the painting, carpentry work, and landscaping improvements then. As soon as the summer season came, some of those cottage owners would move their whole families in. Then the grocery stores would have plenty of business. So the kitchen help would stock up the pantry for the summer. Joe Riddle, who was working in the lifesaving service, he was off a week in between his shifts. And when he was off, he was working on the river, too. He had his own boat and equipment. In those days, they used to put a net in the water and run it out maybe fifty feet, and then fifty feet across and then back, so it was closed. They would take the crabs and stock them in there. They would go in and overhaul the crabs, and the ones that were approaching the shed were put in the shedder car. And they always kept a hard crab car handy for the chauffeurs and others that would come in and ask for hard crabs. Soft crabs needed careful handling. When they shed the hard shell, they were defenseless against predators. To become marketable, they were kept separate in salt water containers until they were sufficiently hardened for delivery to the consumer.

Ms. Higgins: Thank you very much, Mr. Wilcox for this very interesting interview.

Mr. Wilcox: You're welcome. I would like to compliment you on the ease that you put me in.

Ms. Higgins: Thank you.