



Interview with Thomas McMahon

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

Date of Interview: July 18, 1999

Premises of Interview: Mr. McMahon's home, Freehold, NJ

Name of Interviewer: Emily Bershad

Birthdate of subject: December 19, 1935

Ms. Bershad: Tell me a little bit about Monmouth County and specifically Freehold, where you were born.

Mr. McMahon: I was born in Freehold on December 19, 1935, and here is where I have spent my entire life. I remember Freehold fondly from my youth. It was just a wonderful place to grow up and to see the changes in the world. I particularly remember when I was young and how it has changed since, as far as the population has grown. What was farm land and meadows has now become somewhat less, more for the residence, and the area has grown dramatically. When I was a youngster, it was nice to go to farm my grandfather's farm. He used to grow asparagus, potatoes, and corn. He would take all his fruits and vegetables into the Borough of Freehold, behind the American Hotel to the market yard. That is where he, along with his fellow farmers, used to bring their produce to sell them off the wagons. There were, of course, no shopping malls around. There was just a restaurant here and a restaurant there. One was called Van's, and from what I understand, it was a speakeasy during the 1920s. It was owned by my sister-in-law's family.

I remember Freehold being a small town that everyone took a great deal of pride in because it was the county seat. We had two theatres. One was the Strand Theatre, and the other was the Liberty Theatre; both were on Main Street. When they began, there were no talking movies. They had an orchestra setup in the

Strand Theatre and they had vaudeville acts. When the talkies finally came into play, it was wonderful to see real movies because it only cost you a quarter to do so. What else can I remember? Well, as I said, I was born in 1935. I was born in the town of Freehold in the hospital, which is presently an attorney's office, adjacent to the Freehold Savings and Loan. That was the Hospital of Freehold.

Ms. Bershad: Was it called the Freehold Hospital?

Mr. McMahon: I believe it was.

Ms. Bershad: So you had an orchestra in every theatre. Tell us about the speakeasy.

Mr. McMahon: That was Van's.

Ms. Bershad: Was it the same location as it is now?

Mr. McMahon: Yes, it is on Route 79 in Freehold. When you come right down to it, there was only the Colts Neck Inn, as my memory serves me, Van's, and the American Hotel. There were obviously no fast food places. So the times really have changed dramatically over my lifetime here in Monmouth County. My father had a store in Freehold, a men's clothing store, James A. McMahon's Men's Clothier. There was a place called Sid Strykers as well.



James McMahon, Thomas McMahon's father (right) and other relatives

Ms. Bershad: Where about was that?

Mr. McMahon: It was right on Main Street, and I remember that during and after the Second World War, it was tough times for a lot of merchants because of the need for the cloth for the soldiers. The men's wear industry and the women's wear industry were unable to get much in the way of materials for the clothing, because they were all going to the war effort. Thinking of this, the Second World War was a big thing in the theatres. They had the war bonds sold and everybody was seeing the patriotic movies at the time. I also remember air raid tests in school, having to go under the desks for safety. At home we had to close the curtains and turn off the lights when a siren blew. It was scary for young children.



Thomas McMahon in a school picture from St. Rose of Lima School in Freehold

Ms. Bershad: Were the schools the same as they are today?

Mr. McMahon: No.

Ms. Bershad: Vocation wise?

Mr. McMahon: Yes and no. Saint Rose is where I graduated from, but it was a different school then. A new school has been put up, I guess probably thirty years ago. The old building was a small brick one with many outside steps. It was torn down and now there's a parking lot on McLean Street opposite the church.

Ms. Bershad: Is the high school in the same location?

Mr. McMahon: Yes, the high school is the same location. We only had one high school at the time, and that was on Route 79. Matter of fact, my grandfather's farm was about a mile and a half away, and in those days, there were no houses, just my grandfather's farmhouse. You could see the high school just looking to the right from his porch. Part of my youth was spent on his porch looking at the surroundings and the countryside that was absolutely gorgeous.

Ms. Bershad: You were watching the world go by.

Mr. McMahon: Watching the world go by, and it went by very slowly.

Ms. Bershad: Did you walk to school?

Mr. McMahon: Yes, we walked to school almost always. There were no buses, except for the students from other towns. Pretty much everybody walked to school, living in the Boro.

Ms. Bershad: I understand that many of the streets in Freehold Borough and also the general Freehold area, which is now Freehold Township, were named after residents.

Mr. McMahon: That's true, as a matter of fact, one is named Terence Terrace, after my cousin. There is a Ryan Boulevard, which was my grandfather's name. My grandmother's maiden name was Cannon, and there is a Cannon Road. All are in Freehold Township. Another thing that is coming to my mind is the Freehold Racetrack. I remember in my youth going to the Freehold Raceway often, and it was quite exciting to see the horses. My sister-in-law Jean Cartwright was a marshal there. She would lead the horses out, and she rode a beautiful horse. My sister-in-law was a pretty girl, and she was written up in *The New York Times* at one time showing pictures of her doing just that: leading the

horses out. It was exciting for the family to see her in *The New York Times*. They eventually changed that to a machine to start the races. Seems like a lot of people from the Freehold area worked at the racetrack and many fond memories were started there.

My father was in business for twenty-seven years. He started in 1922, and he retired in 1950. Now I also have a men's clothing store, presently in Little Silver, NJ, and I have been in business for twenty-eight years. So I did take some inspiration from my father, which I am very happy and very proud of. My father also had a cigar store in Freehold, next to what is now Sweet Lew's Cafe.

Ms. Bershad: Sweet Lew's is a restaurant?

Mr. McMahon: Yes, it is a luncheonette, and it is owned by my son-in-law and my daughter, Keith Lewis and Sandy Lewis. The food there is wonderful!

Ms. Bershad: I certainly believe that, I have been there. What would you say is your sharpest memory as far as Freehold is concerned? Is there one thing that stands out in your mind when you think back to when you were young, any event, or something special?

Mr. McMahon: Well, there was a fire in Freehold that destroyed the Strand Theatre. And I happened to be in town at the time, and it took a number of buildings along with it. It was one of the biggest fires that Freehold had in my lifetime, and they never rebuilt the theatre after that. That was next to the county building on Main Street.

Ms. Bershad: The Hall of Records?

Mr. McMahon: The Hall of Records, yes, right next to that. It took the bakery, a shoe store, I believe, and two or three other stores. It took a good bit of the block on Main Street.

Ms. Bershad: And when was this approximately?

Mr. McMahon: In the late 1950s.

Ms. Bershad: Well, that was very interesting. Thank you so much for sharing your memories.