

Name of Interviewee: Robert Purdue
Recording Identification: Rec003_0038
Google Drive Folder: Oral History / mhc150_Perdue_Robert
Additional Materials:
Interviewer:
Date: 10/19/2018
Location: 54 North Mountain Avenue, Montclair, NJ

Introduction:

[0:21] Pete Ibsen/Ebson worked for his family's business [Perdue Radio Co.], where they sold records and radios, for a very long time and ultimately headed up the service department of the store.. Robert recalls how his father, the manager of the store, hired Ibsen/Ebson. Pete was inquiring if Robert's father had any work available; his father told Pete to deliver records to Glenwood Avenue. Apparently Pete delivered them and returned so quickly that Robert's dad didn't realize he'd even left; and being so impressed, Robert's dad hired Pete on the spot. Robert recalls that the service department (meters, etc.) was ultimately moved to a location [possibly spun off to separate business run by Ibsen/Ebsen] – he thinks he recalls Midland Avenue.

[2:50] Robert recalls his father played handball at the YMCA, which had just been built four years prior; Robert's dad played with Pete Ibsen/Ebsen and two –husky -- police officers. The YMCA was very important to all of them. Only men were allowed there at that time; men would walk around nude.

[4:47] The address of their business when it first started in Montclair was 501 Bloomfield Avenue. The store's back door opened up to "the brook." Robert remembers riding his bicycle to the Montclair store, from their home in Orange. He doesn't recall the exact year the Montclair store opened, but given that Robert was born February 23, 1918, he calculates that the Montclair store opened in the late 1920s if he was able to ride his bicycle there on his own. The store's second location was the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and South Park Street.

[6:20] The Old King Cole mural painted inside the Wedgewood Cafeteria [also on South Park Street] was painted by a man named Victor Trent, whose real last name was Pedrotti. The Perdue family asked the painter to paint some musical figures on the interior walls of the store and help them "trim" the windows – which Robert thought was wonderful.

[7:44] He ate at the Wedgewood Cafeteria, recalling that some of the women who worked there had been there a very long time. He also recalls sort of a "men's table."

[8:38] He was born in Orange Memorial Hospital in Orange and while he doesn't recall exactly when the family moved to Montclair, it may have been when the Montclair store moved from Bloomfield Avenue to the corner of Bloomfield and South Park. However, the family's store was firstly established as a corner store in Montclair and then moved to South Park Street during the Depression. At this time, the store sold phonographs, radios and records – sheet music, also, at one time. Their competitor, National Music Shop was located nearby on the middle of Bloomfield Avenue; when Robert decided that Perdue Radio would cut the price of records in

half, he went down and informed the competitor so he wouldn't be surprised; but Robert never really knew the owner of that store. Another competitor sold sheet music on Bloomfield Avenue. He went to the shop and gave them all their sheet music for no charge. Perdue Radio then concentrated on high-fidelity systems and consoles and Magnavox (?) at that time, for which they became well-known.

[12:10] The family business then began to do church installations, which Robert enjoyed. The employees would crawl around” and install amplifiers and microphones. “It was very rewarding. I loved doing all that”, Robert said.

He claimed the sound systems and installations that his family business installed, superseded today's capabilities. During the installations, the man who made Bozak speakers would assist Robert with the acoustics and tested them by sharply clapping his hand and listening to make sure there was “decay” – a little echo. Lack of “decay” was a bad sign.

[13:45] His first memory of home was the family's apartment on Main Street in Orange. He believed the complex was called the Fairbanks Apartment. His family then moved into a house “at the top of” Watchung Avenue, then to Brookfield Road, and eventually, his family moved into [Upper Mountain Avenue in] Upper Montclair. He attended Mount Hebron School.

[15:00] Prompted by a photo of his former store, he recalls the Aiello Brothers, two brothers (one named Gabriel) who came from Italy and started a grocery store. He recalls they did a lot of work themselves, worked hard and eventually owned a lot of the real estate on the north side of Bloomfield Avenue and property on South Park Street, including the Wedgewood and Gabe's Galley.

[16:15] He went to Montclair High School. He claimed he was not much of a scholar, but picked up quite a few useful skills, i.e., mechanical drawing, which prepared him to make the window signs and streamers for the family business. He later worked for the Ivory Bird, a Montclair antique shop, and made signs and little cards for that store, “Visit our second floor.” etc.

[17:29] Carmen Berra, Yogi Berra's wife, entered the shop one day while he was working. “Anybody who ever met Carmen, never forgot her,” Robert said.

[18:46] He graduated from high school either in 1937 or 1938. He recalls Madisons, a stationery (and book?) store, and recalls some of the employees he knew from shopping there.

[19:48] His wife was from West Caldwell. He had recently returned from World War II when he met his wife. One day he was playing tennis with his friend, Sid Cole, who asked Robert if he wanted to travel to the shore the following day. The next day they traveled to the beach where Robert spotted his wife, Connie Dye, walking on the sidewalk – who would become Connie Perdue. She had fallen asleep on the sand; he made a little tent for her out of someone's camera tripod, which she thought was cute. He asked if she would enjoy a beer with his friends; she would later admit that she didn't really like beer, but she really wanted to go with him!

[22:08] They started seeing each other. He lived in the barn behind his folks' house on 349 Upper Mountain Avenue. One day he almost inadvertently proposed to her at the barn when he said, "You know, after we're married..."

[22:45] He had two children: Joe and daughter Renny. He named Renny after a character from a book he had been reading.

[23:00] Robert was in the Army; as a selectee, he was "invited" into the army and he was supposed to spend one year, and one day. His mom thought otherwise and suspected it would be longer because she was aware of current events. He was sent to Newark and then was sent to Fort Dix where they lived in tents heated by little coal stoves. Then he went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Sometimes they would meet girls there on the golf course next to Fort Bragg. He discussed a vivacious, pretty, very nice woman who he got quite close to during his time at Fort Bragg, but he was glad he didn't marry her because he said he would have broken her heart. She eventually married another man, who might have been named Hopper. He remembers sitting in front of the library in Southern Pines with her as she read to him from a classic, perhaps *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in her lovely southern voice.

[26:56] His son Joe worked in the family business at Perdue Radio. His son delivered products from the business. An elegant Black man named Linwood worked alongside his family in the business. In school at George Inness, he sat behind a "colored fellow" in school and the two of them were pals. After school, regardless of race, the children would play a game called "organized tag" by Watchung Avenue, North Mountain, Anderson Park. He said he was the fastest out of his friends, and he recalls being able to run up to a fence and, by just putting his weight against the fence, flip right over it. He would regularly play in the street, rather than play on the playgrounds.

[30:50] Robert recalls Halloween, Mischief Night, and he advised his friends NOT to damage anything, because their parents had worked hard for the things – and his friends listened to him! When asked about the schools, Robert recalled, "I was a terrible student." But he reiterated his fascination with the printing press, and the mechanical drawing skills he'd learned. He remembered that in one class they worked with a lathe for woodworking projects, and how you had to work in cooperation with the wood – pointing to an example of a spindle in the interview room and sharing other examples of the intricate work possible with a lathe.

[33:52] He remembers how easy it was to park along South Park Street near the store. One section of the store was for radios and batteries. Ladies would come in with their radio when they needed batteries replaced; he and his staff took time with these women to speak with them and give them time, even though they could have replaced the batteries themselves.

[36:12] Talks again about how "remarkable" the YMCA on Park Street was and continues to be.

[37:30] When he retired from Perdue Radio, after he sold the business, at about age 70, he worked for Ivory Bird Antiques because he didn't have anything to do. A tennis mate of his wife Connie's mentioned that they needed something repaired at Ivory Bird Antiques, and Connie

replied, “Bob will fix it.” And then he spent every day fixing something, and he enjoyed it very much.

[39:30] Discussion of Gabe’s Galley which was a bar attached to the restaurant that had been Wedgewood Cafeteria. They discussed Bond’s in Upper Montclair; he knew the whole Bond family and recalls they had a sort of cafeteria style restaurant. He recalls their iconic Awful, Awful drink.

[41:00] Recalling some of the customers he had, he mentions installing a sound system for Yogi and Carmen Berra, working in Llewellyn Park homes, Montclair churches

[42:20] His family were parishioners at St. James Church, although they were not big church-goers. He recalls Pastor Judd/Judge. He also recalls attending Grace Church in Orange as a youngster.

[47:10] He talked about installing some equipment at the Wellmont. He was asked to come to St. Mark’s on Elm Street where he gave a lecture on acoustics with the parishioners – mostly women. He admired the “fanfare” they conducted – a vocal display -- while practicing – very enthusiastic. He recalled installing Bozak speakers on the beam at St. James Church and wondered if they were still in use.

[52:00] When asked if he knew Allen Du Mont[creator of first commercial television], Robert exclaimed that he did not, although Robert’s father knew Du Mont, as Du Mont lived near the Perdue’s Upper Mountain Avenue home, so he’d sit on the porch with his father on Sundays.

[53:50] He recalls his mom and dad’s deaths. He speaks of his sisters, Anne and Jean; he is 10 years older than they. He notes how different his sisters are from each other. Jean lives in Holland and was an artist – he mentions her painting of Upper Montclair train station. He notes that of all the large, fancy homes he went into, there was not much “real art.”

[56:09] He discusses his daughter Renny, who went to a women’s college in Connecticut.

[57:43] People will say, and he agrees, that Montclair is an attractive town. People keep their properties nicely and feel good about being Montclairites.

He fondly recalls sitting at Edgemont Park with his wife Connie looking at the clouds and pondering about the impact people have in the world. He shares a negative opinion he has on solar-powered homes.

[1:00:09] What makes Montclair unique is the physical attractiveness of the town and its parks. He figures he must have met Buzz Aldrin, who was a bit younger than he was, as they played football all the time right near his home adjacent to Anderson Park.

[1:02] He recalls being the “anchorman” – the fastest – on the Mount Hebron School team during a school relay race held at Woodman Field, and they won. Although he was not active otherwise in school sports. He worked in the family store during high school. Mr. Kortley, the physical

education teacher at George Inness, had Robert demonstrate how he could jump over high barriers effortlessly. He also went to a private school, Clark School, in Orange or East Orange, for some time. He recalled lines from Hansel and Gretel, an opera in which he had performed. There is discussion of Robert's appreciation for the arts. He thinks Andrew Wyeth is the most skillful artist.

[1:06] Discussion of the Montclair Art Museum, including some sound and camera installation to monitor and provide security for a very famous painting on exhibit – the alternate (?) Mona Lisa. More general discussion of artwork ensues.

[1:12] Remembers lunch with friends, the Wise Guys, including Jerry Verlenza (?), at the Grasshopper Restaurant in Cedar Grove.

He didn't eat out much in Montclair himself.

[1:16:04] The location where the oral history interview took place, 54 North Mountain Avenue, was the location where they were going to put in another railroad. They had done the excavation, and had built mounds throughout Montclair to create level track area. A big section through Park Street. The track would have continued through to Verona. He recalls that the second floor of Tierney's is where parties were held for organizations, etc. Robert recalls that his father was president of the Rotary Club, but Robert was not that active in the club. His father was also the president of the YMCA.

[1:21:34] He mentions "the estate next door," which is clarified by the interviewer as the Van Vleck House and Gardens, as a place anyone can walk in/around. Robert figures they knew the Van Vleck family.

[1:22] He recalls the Wedgewood Cafeteria, the women behind the counter who dished out the food, and he remembers them as being very, very advanced in age! Talk turns back to the Aiello family that owned the building in which the Perdue Store was housed and many other buildings, and a country club. The Aiellos were butchers. He also recalls the Louis Harris Department Store on Bloomfield Avenue at Park Street down the street from the Perdue's store and what a wonderful asset it was for town with great products at which his family often shopped.

[1:28] Parting advice is "caveat emptor" (buyer beware); a girl should keep that advice in mind when meeting a boy; don't jump into something; it's a life long commitment. He concedes that he's given his wife Connie "a helluva time." He talks of Connie fondly.

[1:30] Discussion of items in Robert's home including the view, furniture, sound system including his admiration for Bozak speaker technology

[1:36] When asked if he knew any of the Shultz Family [given the Montclair History Center's connection to the Shultz Family home at 30 North Mountain Avenue which was operated as a house museum by MHC from 1996-2020], Robert said he did not know them but recalled that he was "led through there" just to see it.

He recalls sketching a house with his wife Connie, giving the drawings to Lloyd Berrall, who designed the Robert's house. [Lloyd Berrall was one of the founders of the Montclair Historical Society in 1964]

[1:41] He recalls that his father, who was president at the YMCA, was allowed to park his car over at the YMCA, but he often forgot to turn the car off! He would get a call that the car was on, and he'd send someone from the shop over to turn it off. Lengthier discussion of his father and his demise.

[1:45] He recalls his sisters, 10 years his junior, and he recalls their cribs in the family's apartment. And he speaks highly of his caretaker, Almeida.

1:49:45 – recording ends.