

## Dorothy Bell



*This interview on March 11, 1982 is part of an Oral History of West Islip project sponsored by the West Islip Public Library. I am Ethel Morris of the library staff and I will interview Dorothy Bell, who was born in West Islip in 1910.*

*Mrs. Bell, where did your parents come from?*

My parents, Alexander and Josephine Kazenowski were born in the peasant village Stryjewka in the Ukraine which was under the Austrian empire and now it is part of the Soviet Union.

*When did they come to this part of the country? When did they come here?*

They came in the early 1900's. And they first came to New York City. And in 1904 when my father and mother were married they came to Babylon. And they were the first Ukrainian settlers in this vicinity, and others followed.

*Why did they come to Babylon? Why did they choose Babylon?*

At their wedding, there was an old family friend who worked in Riverhead, Long Island, and he suggested that instead of remaining in New York City, the young couple should go to Babylon where they could find work. And my father did get a job in the ice cream factory that was part of a milk farm. This ice cream factor was located on John Street, Babylon near the Long Island Railroad.

*And were you born at home or in a hospital?*

I was born in an upstairs room in an old house on the corner of Higbie Lane and Hawley Ave. That house is no longer standing.

*Who was the doctor that delivered you?*

Doctor Hewlett of Babylon delivered about all the children of West Islip at that time. I remember this story about my brother's birth, Dr. Thomas Casey. When he was born it was a very cold snowy day in February and my mother was about to give birth. And my father was sent to Babylon walking in the deep snow to get Dr. Hewlett and my mother's sister, a teenager who had just come from Europe was staying with her. She was sent to get Mrs. Paprocki, a midwife, to help my mother. And this teenager had the mumps at the time.

*Tell me about the school that you went to.*

I attended a four room schoolhouse and this schoolhouse was at the site of where the Higbie Lane School is now. There were four rooms, but only two of the rooms were being used at that time. Mrs. Kellum taught the upper grades, and Miss Smith taught the lower grades, first and second and third. Mrs. Kellum lived in Babylon on Montauk Highway and her house is still there. It is right across the Argyle Lake. She would ride her bicycle to school each day. Miss Smith also rode her bicycle from Babylon. I remember Miss Smith was called skinny hambone and Mrs. Kellum was always with the whip.

*Did she have a nickname too?*

No. Just with the whip. Reading, writing, and 'rithmetic were the main things in our school in those days. We did not have special music or special gym. Recess was always a great time. And I remember Mrs. Kellum would open the window and ring her bell. At Christmastime the whole school would go out to the woods, someplace around Sunrise Highway and we would pick out a tree and the older boys would chop it and it was fun taking our tree back to school. And it was at Christmastime that we always had special art. I remember playing the piano for our program. Another thing I remember that it was great fun to take lunch on a rainy day.

We would play games in the basement and Mrs. Ireland, our lady custodian, would be in charge with us. We used to have lots of fun.

*Did any of your schoolmates achieve fame in later years?*

Well one person comes to mind, Thelma McQueen, whose theatrical name is Butterfly McQueen. Most of you will remember the little girl who played the part of a maid in "Gone with the Wind." Thelma has had many famous parts in the theatrical world.

*Who earned the first business in West Islip?*

I believe that my father started the first grocery store business. And it was on Hawley Avenue, the part of a house in which we lived. Later on, the little corner store was built, which you still see standing there today. And as a teenager I remember spending many hours in that store, which I believe was a great experience in dealing with people and selling things. I remember bread was about 15c a loaf, sugar 5c a pound, and I remember weighing sugar in bags to sell. And I still have the old coffee grinder which we used. We sold the regular groceries and meat, and always there was the penny candy. Later on we even had ice cream.

*Where did you go to school for high school years?*

We had only six grades in West Islip. We went to Babylon for our high school years and in 1929 I graduated from the Babylon High School. But we had a difficult time in high school in making the transition from our Higbie Lane School to the Babylon School. We came to departmental work, which was a real different angle for us. And there was a teacher, Mrs. Pullace, a very strict person. She would lower her glasses, look at us, and say "Are you from Higbie Lane?" and that made a mark for us. But our boys really proved to be great athletes in baseball and basketball.

*I understand you were the first schoolteacher among the Ukrainian settlers in West Islip. Where did you go to college?*

I went to New Paltz State Normal School. It was a three year school and later on I got my degree by going to Columbia, NYU, Hofstra, Adelphi and collected my credits. And I think it was in 1962 I finally got my degree. And really it was so that I could get a bigger salary.

*Surely. Do you remember your salary the first year you started teaching?*

I think it was about \$10 a day. It was very difficult to get a job in those days. If you were married or if your husband was working they would not consider you for a job. I finally got a job in the sixth grade. Mr. Countryman was the teacher and he had 42 children and they divided the class in half and my first job was being a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in the Higbie Lane School in the building which is still standing.

*Did you teach in any other school in this area?*

Most of my teaching was done in West Islip. I did some teaching in West Babylon and substitute work in Deer Park. Very little, most of it was in West Islip.

*Which schools did you teach in?*

I began teaching in the Higbie Lane School, then the Paul Bellew School which was called the Secatogue School at that time. I taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade there, and then the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Then I asked to go to the Paumanauke School north of Sunrise because my two boys, John and Raymond, were in school. So mother and children were in the same school. Later on, I went to Oquenock School, which is in my backyard. In fact, we sold 10 acres of land to the Board of Education for that school. And I believe Oquenock was the last elementary school built.

*How many years did you teach?*

I taught just about 35 years.

*And when did you retire?*

I retired in 1972.

*Where you sad about retiring, leaving teaching?*

Yes there were days when I would feel lonely and thinking about school, especially the first day of school in September. But in no time I became very busy with my son's nursery work and in horticulture. I find many interesting things to do.

*Did you encounter any problems when you were a school teacher?*

My very first year of teaching, I must confess, was very difficult. I was young, I was early twenties and I was not much older than my 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils. And many of them would call me "Doc" and I would say "Call me Miss Kazenowski." I thought I had to be very strict. I remember wearing high heels to feel that I was taller. But I feel the problems in school teaching are of the same as today. Maybe not as big, but I feel as if the parents cooperated with the teacher and the principal. I think each class has one or two little rascals and you have to know how to handle them. During my years of teacher, I never felt that any child wanted to be bad. It was something in their background, something that happened that made them act the way they did. And I always felt, what can I do to help that child?

*Do you remember when the first P.T.A. started in West Islip?*

The first P.T.A. started in the late 1920's because when I was teaching in 1933, it was a very active program and many, many of the mothers would be interested in what was going on in the school and one of the main activities was the lunch program. I remember the mothers bringing big pots of hot soup so that the children could eat their sandwich with a hot dish of soup.

*Who was the first president of the P.T.A.? Do you remember?*

I believe Carrie Schneider of Sequams was the first P.T.A. president. In fact she served not only one term, but maybe four or five.

*Mrs. Bell, if you had your life to live over again, would you choose to live it in West Islip?*

I feel West Islip has given me a good life. I have seen many, many changes from a little country town to a very busy residential section. I think I like the way it was years ago.

*Why?*

All this traffic. All this commotion. All this on the go all the time. It's just a little too much. I like to go in my backyard and have it nice and quiet. Any time we would go out of our house and on the street, we were bound to meet people that we knew. In fact, we knew everyone in West Islip. And when I taught school, we knew the different families, the children in the family, the street they lived on. Today it has just grown too big.

*Well, Mrs. Bell, West Islip was fortunate indeed to have you and your family as one of the earliest residents. And I want to thank you so much for this very interesting interview this afternoon. Thank you.*