

## Dr. Thomas Casey

*This interview on March 27, 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 Dr. Thomas Casey who was born in West Islip in 1907.*

*Dr. Casey, where did your parents come from?*

My parents came from Ukraine, about 1903 or 1904 to the United States because of the severe poverty of the Ukrainian land in Europe. Furthermore there was conscription for the army and my father did not like the army so he skipped the country into the United States.

*And why did he come to West Islip.*

When my father got married in New York or New Jersey he did not like the city but he preferred the agricultural life in Europe and he loved to work outside, so he came to Long Island to a relative in around Riverhead who had a big farm on Peconic Bay. And there was no particular opportunity to work on the farm at that place but he heard of West Islip which had estates, wealthy estates on Merrick Road and an ice cream factory between Babylon and West Islip on Montauk Hwy and thought that he could get a job at least in the summertime when he came to West Islip.

*Was he ever in business of any kind?*

No. We had a strategic corner in West Islip, the corner of Higbie Lane and Hawley Avenue. And since we were so far away from Babylon village where we bought the groceries, it was a long distance, about a mile at least. Therefore there was an opportunity to start a store so my father built an extension on the old house that has been demolished about 15, 20 years ago. In that addition was the first store in West Islip, first grocery store in West Islip.

*In what year was that?*

That was about 1914.

*Did he ever open another store?*

When the business got fairly good, he built the present store that is located on Higbie Lane and Hawley Avenue and continued the business at that place. Now that's the southwest corner of Higbie Lane and Hawley Avenue and the building still stands today. And he built that around 1922, 23.

*Do you remember what the prices were when your father first opened the store?*

Well we sold cigarettes, groceries, sugar, salt, and canned goods, and uh...

*Bread?*

Bread. We had a big ice box there which we had meat, we'd buy the leg and the thigh of a calf or cow and sliced it up and sold it by the piece.

*Where did you buy that?*

There were butchers, oh yes, all the way from Jamaica located near the railroad station. He would ship us barrels of meat on the train and we would get it the same day in Babylon.

*The railroad cars weren't refrigerated then were they?*

I didn't know of anything like that.



*Do you remember the price of anything that was sold in the grocery store?*

Well the ice cream was about 5 cents a cone, only on weekends. Sugar must have been about 7 or 8 cents pound. And cigarettes were about 10 cents a package. Salt was by the small package about 8 or 9 cents.

*Loaf of bread?*

Loaf of bread was about 10 cents.

*What a difference. What do you remember about your school days? Can you describe the schoolhouse that you went to?*

First of all, they had 2 classes of people in West Islip, the wealthy rich class along Montauk Highway beginning at the Babylon Sumpwams Creek for a mile and a half eastward to Choose Creek near the West Bay Shore district that we know today.

*Now these are the estate owners?*

Right. There were the Higbies, who lived in a mansion across from La Grange Hotel. The building is still there boarded up. It's a little west of the East Islip Bank. There was the Hawley estate which had a pond that was fed by the Sumpwams Creek at Babylon. And there was a whip factory and an ice cream factory way back about 1905, 1906. There was the McCurdy family on Eaton Lane, where Gristedes is now. They owned the property on Eaton Lane all the way to the Bay where the Babylon Yacht Club is at the present time. Then on Eaton Lane was Mr. Eaton who was a lawyer (by the way his house just burnt down last week in the middle of the east side of Eaton Avenue). He was a clerk of the school board in 1900 and from 1904-1908. There was a Wagstaff family that was in West Islip that had a tremendous piece of property all the way from the library along Higbie Lane to Blue Jay Market and eastward from the library to the Wagstaff Lake and from the lake all the way down to Union Avenue.

*So the Wagstaff Estate went from Montauk Highway up right north of the tracks about a half a block north of the railroad tracks, not that far.*

But on Higbie Lane it went all the way down to Blue Jay Market.

*Well, Blue Jay Market is no longer their, but it's north of the railroad.*

Blue Jay is King Kullen.

*King Kullen, yes okay. Now what about the school house itself, was it, how many rooms did it have?*

Okay, since there were two classes of people in West Islip, the rich class, the Higbies, the Eatons, the McCurdys - Wagstaffs ran the school board. They were there because they were concerned about the costs, the taxes that they paid for running the school. So therefore they kept the prices of the school system down because the poor people never came to the school board meetings.

*So the quality of the education for that reason...*

Was very low. They had two teachers, Mrs. Smith who taught the first three grades in one room, and Mrs. Kellum who taught the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> who taught in one large room. Naturally, we had very little attention. We were watching and hearing what the other classes were saying and doing.

*Each row was a separate class?*

Uh, more or less. We had a very poor library because we only had about 50 books and about 10 years out of date at that time. And nobody cared whether we read books or not. They never checked up on us. We'd take a library book on Friday afternoon and brought it back without reading it because nobody asked us what was in it, didn't have to write any reports. And we had two teachers who were very poorly equipped to teach. Mrs. Smith had duratic problems. She was also very particular about mixing with the students. She washed her hands and combed her hair in front of us in the classroom. Mrs. Kellum was a very strict teacher.

*How did she discipline?*

Well, she had no discipline problems, but when we misbehaved, she had an abbreviated horse whip which she bought at Sutter's leather store in Babylon and kept perfect discipline because we were afraid of being punished by her.

*With the horsewhip?*

With the horsewhip. And I was whipped for something I didn't do. Here's how it happened: The boys went lunchtime, instead of going home they went to Mrs. Wagstaff's estate, where the present High School is, and brought back beautiful peaches. When I came to the school grounds at 12:30 they were eating these peaches. And when the bell rang, Mrs. Ireland, who was the janitor, was the watchman during the lunch hour. And she informed Mrs. Kellum that the boys were had robbed the estate peaches. And she took her whip right down the line, and mostly 7<sup>th</sup> grade were in the back of the room and I was in the middle of the room. And she went down the aisle, and she asked each boy, was he there. When she came to me, I said, no I wasn't there. And Henry Lease, the bigger boy who sat behind me said yes he was, yes he was. And since we never talked back to the teachers she whipped me over my back three times. And I said nothing. And we never told our parents that we were disciplined that way because the parents always agreed, respected the teachers. And the discipline was strict and the teachers took care of discipline that way and there was very little bad discipline.

*Was athletics important when you went to school?*

Yes. Since we had very little education in our classroom, we were glad to get out and play baseball and running back and forth from once fence to another because we had a nice ball field in the back of our Higbie Lane School. We spent hours per day playing baseball. Naturally, we also at home we had to chop trees and wood to bring wood for our wood-burning stoves. And worked on the property, keeping it clean, raking the leaves, feeding the chickens, and as a result we were athletically inclined. And we became the best ball players in our high school days when we left West Islip.

*Did you win any championships?*

Well, at high school naturally we were the best ball players there. I made the team while I was in the eighth grade. I was the youngest ball player on the team, playing with the older boys. And I remember my first game with Bay Shore. A ball was hit, I was a left fielder, ball was hit practically over my head. So I began running away from Bay Shore towards Islip and having a big glove, mens glove, like Joe DiMaggio I looked back and I saw the white pill still in the blue sky and I ran a little further and at full speed I stuck my hand out and the ball got caught between the netting between my two fingers and the ball stuck there and I caught the ball miraculously. And when I caught it, it surprised everybody. I remember we had a taxi there, they cranked up the taxi because the horns blew only when the car was running. And that was the biggest even of the day. My catch.

*Did your high school ever win any county championships?*

Oh yes. In my third and fourth year at the Babylon High School, I was one of the outstanding infielders, played short stop, sometimes second base. We won, in the third year, we won the county championship in baseball. We played Patchogue for the championship and we easily won that game to be the champions of Suffolk County. In my senior year, I graduated to be a pitcher for West Islip High School. There in, we played for the championship of south central Suffolk County against Amityville. At that particular game, I had perfect command of the pitching job. At that time, I could put the ball within six inches of the catcher's glove on *every* throw, hard to believe. And I had a drop that no body could touch. The last inning was West Babylon, was ahead, we were ahead 3 to 2. And I decided on my own to strike the last three batters with nine strikes. So I talked to the catcher that we were going to throw my best pitch, which was a drop, which we could depend on it dropping below the batters bat. And I threw nine strikes and the ball wasn't touched by any batter, which was a great feat I thought because I've never seen that done on any team that I played on.

*When you went into college, where did you go to college?*

When I finished high school in Babylon, we did not have a guidance department. We had a Principal who in general helped us to get into college, but we practically wrote out our own application and let it go at that. And nobody checked it or helped us. Fortunately, in my Sunday School days that the Presbyterian Church in Babylon was a Sunday School teacher whose name was Mr. Newman. He lived in Babylon. He was the Principal of Alexander Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, very knowledgeable fellow and a graduate from Columbia. And since Columbia was such an outstanding college in sports and in education, and with my Sunday school teacher without it known to him, I applied for Columbia. And I was picked out one out of ten applicants. That's how strong the competition was at that time.

*So athletics played a very important part in your life?*

Athletics was a very strong point, but I was also, I finished high school with four years of Latin, three years of French, mathematics through trigonometry, and four years of English, finishing five years of work in four years. Not high marks, average marks. My highest mark by the way was physics wherein I got a 98%, how, why, I don't know, I must have answered almost every question correctly. With that record I applied to Columbia and Columbia wrote back and said will you please get somebody to back you up and to write us a letter about you. So I went to my minister, Mr. Brocky, at the Presbyterian Church, and being a high school graduate, a good ball player, and a good Sunday school boy, and also I played the violin in by the way in high school. I was thought of as an all around quality boy. And that's why I think Columbia took me in.

*Did you continue your athletic career in Columbia?*

Yes. I made the team in my freshman year.

*Baseball?*

In baseball. And during the freshman year we won every game that year as freshman class, not the varsity. Next year, since I was such a good batter, with an occasional homerun in my high school days, I highly qualified for the varsity high school team. And it was my lucky experience of playing for Columbia because the first time I got up at Baker Field, the Columbia baseball team at the northern boundary of Manhattan Island, and the baseball field over center field fence was the Harlem River. The first ball I hit goes into the Harlem River. So I became one of the best batters on the ball team qualifying for pinch hitting when necessary. And I had the experience of playing Army at West Point, where I hit the ball into the center field and ran almost to second base before he caught it, but he caught it. And that was the end of my, but I had I had to run around base, and from second base he scored, but I got put out by the catch.

*Dr. Casey, how many students were in your high school graduated class?*

About 35 students.

*And how many of those went to college?*

Very few, because the poverty in West Islip, during the Depression, the coming Depression, and the poor education of the West Islip students was so small that very few students went to college in my time.

*Did a large percentage not graduate, drop out?*

The West Islip students, 95% of the students never reached third or fourth year high school because they couldn't cope with algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and they didn't have much money and the jobs were not too many around, so they got their working papers and that ended their education.

*You mentioned the Depression, what were your memories of the Depression?*

As we approached 1930, the jobs got scarcer and scarcer, locally, the young boys without an education naturally couldn't find a job. Also the fathers and their parents couldn't get a job except those who worked on the estates in West Islip. As a result there was no money around, and no jobs around, and what sustained them more than anything else was that the local people had gardens that they loved and cultivated, potatoes, corn, beans, cabbage, carrots, so on and so forth. That garden contributed a lot to their ability to face a Depression, or a recession at that time. The college students in 1930 also had a very difficult time with a

general liberal arts education, and they were not equipped to be school teachers because you had to have a normal school or a teachers college background to get a job in education. Consequently, at that time many of the college graduates, lawyers and engineers were working in Macy's for 28 or 30 dollars a week. That sustained them financially to a certain extent and then finally the Depression lessened in 1932, 33 and 34, they went back to their respective professions and succeeded very nicely.

*How was your father, your father's business affected by the Depression?*

Right. The business got worse and worse at our little grocery store. The people didn't have any money, by the way we had a big book where we trusted most of the local customers by providing the groceries and they would have a little book and we had a big book where everything was put down and given credit to them. As the 1929 and 1930 depression got worse and worse. My father came in debt to the extent of 600 dollars. And not knowing how he would buy his groceries from the wholesaler, he had to before he was forced to close the store for about 1 or 2 years until the depression got alleviated and he started the store again.

*What did you do after you graduated Columbia?*

I thought that the best way to face the depression days and not to be a victim of the depression I thought that I had to have some kind of skill, profession. As a result, I thought that having a background of mechanics, fixing our Ford car at home also a working like a carpenter building garages or barns or fixing up outside the house. We were more or less handy mechanically. So I thought that dentistry would be a suitable job for me which I would be used to the mechanics and that decided my reason to go to be a dentist.

*How did dental care differ when you were a child from dental care today?*

Basically, the old time dentist was a loner, a solo dentist, not having dental nurses when I was in Babylon. We had two dentists, Dr. Deel and Dr. Byers. They alone worked their dental hours and made mostly the fillings and the dentures as far as I know. I think the laboratories began at that time and some of the dental mechanics were helping out the local dentists. In contrast, today, the student has power drills, high speed drills, who with carbide burrs can drill the teeth faster. Also he uses anesthetics more often and does not hurt the patient at any time. And also with the aid of skilled dental nurses, he has the ability to produce more work and having more superior materials, antibiotics, and other medicines that are more up to date than they had in the 1920's and 1930's.

*So dentistry was much more painful when you were a child than it is now. Did the children go to the dentists regularly?*

They feared dentistry to a great extent around 1930 because of the pain factor and many students, boys and girls, who had money finally had their work done more often than a poorer class. Fortunately, when I was in the seventh or eight grade in West Islip school we had to fill out medical and dental cards showing that we had medical and dental attention. Those who could not afford the dental work were letting their teeth decay. Finally they lost their teeth at the age of 20 or 21 or 22 and got false dentures placed. Those who could afford it were able to save their teeth because of their better finances.

*Dr. Casey, I understand that you've received a beautiful plaque from the school board for 18 years of service, when did you first become active in school affairs?*

Being so disappointed with the West Islip School system in 1922, while in eighth grade I first appeared at the local school board meeting in June and I in the audience asked for a little better treatment for the West Islip School children because so many students failed to continue their high school education in Babylon. As a result I was quickly spotted as a local rebel who was looking for trouble with a chip on my shoulder trying to change things as they have been in West Islip that was run by the school board members from the richer class on Merrick Road.

*When did the quality of education finally start to improve in West Islip?*

Basically, when the estates fell apart where the wealthy owners could not pay their taxes, they sold their property and went off to the city and left West Islip school system as it was, in not such a good state and the

middle class came in, bought up the cheap property available in West Islip, and it was this middle class that came in that filled Keith Lane with Concord Village and the residential area between the railroad and Sunrise Highway. There were enough people there interested in their children, education, and so they came to the school board and became interested in education and slowly increased the school system in terms of the size of the schools and better quality teachers and it improved to this day.

*What was the greatest problem when you were serving on the school board as an adult? The greatest problem of the school.*

Well, first of all we had to build the buildings to house this terrific explosion in the 1950's and 1960's.

*School population explosion*

Right. North and south of the tracks. As a result, West Islip was not ready for school buildings. The only school we had at that time was the elongated wooden school house where the Senior Citizen Center is now.

*And was formerly the Higbie Lane School.*

Right. And I was so dissatisfied that they finally put me on the committee, a committee of one, what we should do next step because they only proposed a building program with two schoolrooms and a cafeteria to add on to this old wooden school. No not the wooden school, the school that was there in 1932. Knowing that the building program was inadequate I told them to throw their plans in the basket and go north and build some property so they selected me as a committee of one to look for a school system and report to them. I came back in a week's time with the following report: That they should do what Bay Shore did, leave Merrick Road area, leave their high school property and go north and since they bought up 39 acres on Sunrise Highway on the southeast corner, they built their big school. Consequently, I came back to West Islip, and told them that they should go ahead and go up north a mile and a half, which is by the way the geographical center of West Islip, and by the southeast corner and build a larger school there. They didn't follow my advice, so they went out and bought only 8 acres, where Paumanake School is, which was all right with me because it made our first extension of school system for the north portion of West Islip.

*So the great problem when you were on the board was the tremendous growth in the school population.*

*What is the greatest problem of the school board now? There is certainly a declining population now.*

We have two problems now facing our school system. One is to pay for the high quality of education in West Islip. I think we are one of the best schools in Suffolk County, ranking with Patchogue and Bayshore and Sewanhaka High School, and as a result we have one of the best school teaching staff, 400 teachers about, or 350 now. We have a budget of about 25 million dollars. Teachers' pay is equivalent with the best in the county, and they are paid by the way due to their very good union that they have has enabled them to have a very high salaries. We have to continue our education and serve the children adequately; therefore the taxes are rather high and there are widows and widowers who cannot keep paying the taxes for their homes, because they've paid for their schooling of their children many years back. To continue the high state of education in West Islip, we need more and more aid from the state and more and more aid from the Federal Government. And since the Federal Government is cutting out some of the aid to the states whose responsibility by the way is to take care of education in their state, we are faced with the problem of high taxes and the continuation of high quality education. And it is only through the state aid and through the federal aid that we can continue to maintain such high standards. Last week, I was with the school board at Albany, really begging for more and more money, and the state has a state problem who have to take care of not only education, but the state parks. The high schools and the grade school system and the help of the Medicare that the state has to take care of, along with Federal money, now the taxes are going to be high and West Islip's taxpayer is faced with a big problem. And we are trying to economize. We are trying to cut down our staff according to the smaller school population and try to still continue to remain on par with the best schools in Suffolk County.

*So that is a big problem. So I understand then, that even now, even though you are retired you are still fighting for better schools.*

And also, how to dispose of the schools that are vacated. Now we have the problem of having... First of all we've disposed beautifully of the Higbie Lane School because we wanted and needed a center for the senior citizens and other things that can be placed there like a museum or some other department that the Islip town hall would like to use extra those rooms that are there. So we sold the West Islip Higbie Lane School, received about \$100,000 for it and we used that money for taking care of our education expenses in the present school system. Now we have in the south, in the geographical center of West Islip, we have the school that is closed, Southgate's 17 acres of property. And we, to this day, we haven't got a tenant that can adequately take care of that building or a school that's willing to buy it or a institution to use it for themselves or we cannot use it for a factory because it's a residential area. So the expenses still are heating the place so the rooms are not, so the place doesn't freeze up in the wintertime, that the heat is there. It's an expense to maintain that school right now and it's a white elephant.

*That's because of the declining birth rate.*

And the birth rate, there's no hope in our future to utilize that school. So I'm recommending that we demolish that whole school building and to turn it into a central park. I call it a central park since it's located centrally in West Islip so that the children can come from the four parts of West Islip to play this games and sports and the various sports equipment that is there outside of the building.

*Dr. Casey, it's wonderful to know that even though you're retired, that your interest in West Islip schools and your vision for the future of West Islip has not diminished. And I'd like to thank you for this very interesting interview this afternoon.*

*Thank you so much.*