

Edwin & Annette Eppig



This interview on March 29, 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 Edwin & Annette Eppig, who have lived in West Islip since 1921, and 1905, respectively.

Morris: Mr. Eppig, I understand that your father came out to West Islip from Brooklyn in 1921. What was his occupation, what did he do out here in West Islip?

Eppig: He ran a hotel and restaurant.

Morris: And who were the guests at the hotel?

Eppig: Well, people mainly from the city who came out to spend the summers here. And some were people, older people, who just needed a place to live.

Morris: What was the name of the hotel?

Eppig: Eppig House and Gardens.

Morris: And, where was it?

Eppig: On Montauk Hwy and Tahlulah Lane, on the west side of Tahlulah Lane.

Morris: Was it a large hotel?

Eppig: It was not small, but it was not as large as hotels are. It used to be, when the dining room of the hotel was full used to have 70 people in it. For me it was regular.

Morris: So when you were growing up, you must have had a lot of chores in connection with the hotel?

Eppig: I was kitchen help. I was good at opening clams and preparing grapefruit, serving desserts.

Morris: Did you have any other chores?

Eppig: I worked in the hotel garden. We raised vegetables for the hotel and I handled chickens and ducks that we raised. I had the job of killing them and plucking them and gutting them. I used to do that.

Morris: That wasn't too pleasant was it? And any other chores?

Eppig: I cut wood, and cut the lawns. I used to do that with the horse, with the horse drawn grass cutter. I used to do that.

Morris: The horse pulled the grass cutter.

Eppig: That's right.

Morris: You rode the horse?

Eppig: I rode the grasscutter.

Morris: And you said you cut wood? There was a lot of wood around the area.

Eppig: Well, there was always wood available, to, you know.

Morris: And, did you, how did you, did you get paid for all of these chores?

Eppig: No.

Morris: No, nothing.

Eppig: It was just chores

Morris: Just part of your responsibilities.

Eppig: That's right.

Morris: How did you earn spending money when you were a boy?

Eppig: I never did have much money. I did make spending money by picking watercress in the brook that ran along the Eaton property, between the Eaton and the Davies property. That brook was very clear and formed the head waters of Sumpwams Creek here.

Morris: Sumpwams Creek.

Eppig: Not only that. When we, and the hotel, I was also the bell-hop. I used to get tips from moving, and bringing luggage in, and setting people up, and I used to also park the cars in the garage, and get them out for them in the morning, and I was also hustling that way to get tips and everything, so I did get spending money that way.

Morris: You said you picked watercress from the Sumpwams Creek., what did you do with that?

Eppig: Made bunches of it, and then took it down and sold it to the La Grange.

Morris: Sold it to the La Grange Inn.

Eppig: Yeah, and I also took it into some of the stores in the village.

Morris: What was Sumpwams Creek like in those days? Was it like it is today? Muddy?

Eppig: Well, no, it was crystal clear back in those days. In fact when we went crabbing, we used fish heads on the end of the line and we would never pull the fish head in until there were 2 crabs on it cause we were always interested in getting the most crabs we could get, and found out that was the quickest way to get them. And I never came home without a bushel of crabs.

Morris: And you could see.

Eppig: We would see the crabs coming along and go for the crabs head cause the water was so crystal clear. I'm hoping it gets that way when the sewers get hooked up.

Morris: I hope so, um, and did you ever sell any flowers when you were a boy yourself?

Eppig: Well I did. We started our business by selling flowers on the road from the hotel garden until my father, our father found out what we were doing and he made a suggestion that we would raise flowers to do that. In 1927 we started to raise flowers to do that, and we were fortunate that year, we borrowed 1000 {valley} boats from a fella in W. Babylon and when the frost came that year it killed everybody's but ours. And a fellow from NY, a florist, stopped to buy flowers from us the following Sunday, and we showed him the field that we had that was still alive, and he sent a truck out for the next month, and took every flower that we had raised, and paid us the price we were selling them for on the road. And that's how our Eppig Gardens got its start; through that contact.

Morris: So, actually, you were the boy who started the Eppig Gardens, rather than your father.

Eppig: My brother and I.

Morris: Your brother and you started it. Did you father go into business with you or did he continue in the hotel business.

Eppig: In 1933 he came into the business with us and gave up the hotel and we moved to where the Eppig Gardens now exists. And we had a lot of land there to grow things.

Morris: Were there any other factors in your father's decision to give up the hotel?

Eppig: Well the factor was it was the depression years and the hotel business had dropped off, and then there was the other thing, is my father is an absolute non-drinker, and he didn't want to run a speak easy, and consequently the business and the hotel didn't do well cause he didn't serve any liquor.

Morris: Illegally.

Eppig: Like some of the other restaurants around were doing.

Morris: During prohibition. So, you certainly had a lot of chores when you were a boy. Did you have any time for fun?

Eppig: We certainly had time for fun. In the winter, we played hockey. We were very fortunate as young boys at that time cause the older generation that was around at that time decided to make good hockey players out of a bunch of us. And consequently when I went to high school, three of us from Babylon here played on the Fisher Blockland High School in Brooklyn, and we went to the Catholic High School championship, and after we did that, the public high schools challenged us to a game, and we beat New Utreak and we won the city championship. And there were three of us from West Islip here who were on that team, but in addition to being hockey players, we played baseball and the hotel that my father had had a tennis court and we used to have Forest Hills people who were staying at the hotel, and consequently I got a very good start as a tennis player playing with those people. I never really been a golfer but I've been a tennis player. But we did other things, we went berrying.

Morris: Picking berries.

Eppig: Blackberries down along the marshes, blueberries and down in the bay end of the Wagstaff property there was a wonderful cranberry bog down there. And I was picking cranberries down there one day, and this one had a lot of trees around it, and bushed around it, and I was sorta in a pocket where I was picking the cranberries and I stood up to change my position where I could get more berries and as I stood up and fellow shot at me and all of bullets went the the hair on the back of my head, and the fellow screamed. He said, "I thought you were a duck."

Morris: So there was duck hunting.

Eppig: The fellows were hunting down there at that time. I used to hunt there too.

Morris: What did you hunt?

Eppig: Duck, geese, pheasants and quail. Pheasants used to come from the Ned Arnold Place. He used to raise them and they used to get out of him and we used to shoot them when they got out.

Morris: Oh, Ned Arnold's estate.

Eppig: That's right, that's where the pheasant came from. But I got quail and I always had, my mother always was a real strict person and I was never allowed to bring any game in the house until it was plucked and gutted or skinned and gutted. And everything, many a nights, I had rabbit stew and hassenfeffer from the rabbits I brought in.

Morris: So there were plenty of places to go hunting around here.

Eppig: oh yes, yes

Morris: And fishing too.

Eppig: Fishing, oh, fishing, we always had snappers and flounders and when we went out on the boat we got weakfish and bluefish.

Morris: There were no homes along the bay at all?

Eppig: There were no homes all the way from Babylon to Bay Shore visible from the bay, except for the big houses on the estates. You could see them. When I was a boy, from my bedroom in the hotel, I was able to see the bay all of the time, and I used to watch the rum runners coming in, and they used to come to the end

of Tahlulah Lane. Tahlulah Lane used to go to the bay in those days and the trucks used to go down there and meet them. They would signal from the ir boat siren thing, and the signal went back to them from the shore and they would come in. I never got a chance to go down there near them because my father forbid me to go near them afraid that I would get shot. But they were bringing in the liquor that way.

Morris: During prohibition.

Eppig: Down on Tahlulah Lane. Illegal. That was, the rum runners were coming in that way.

Morris: I understand that there were four different Wagstaff estates in West Islip when you were younger. Now one of them was north of the Montauk Hwy and went from ...

Eppig: the west side of the lake

Morris: the west side of Wagstaff Lake.

Eppig: but it went north as far north as possibly Hunter Avenue, which was an old back road to Bay Shore. When I was a boy that was the only back road to Bay Shore. Hunter Avenue, when was the road that was built for the Muncneys when they had their mansion on Hunter Avenue. That Hunter Avenue is an ancient road.

Morris: But this particular Wagstaff estate?

Eppig: The brook as it went north had Indian trails along side of the brook that were still in existence when I was a boy, and we used to walk those Indian trails all the time. They were beautiful. And, I don't know if any of them still exist.

Morris: And, so Wagstaff estate started where Higbie Lane is now, where the present library is now, and went all the way to Oak Neck Road I understand.

Eppig: No not quite Oak Neck Road

Morris: Almost

Eppig: There were about 2 other estates this side of Oak Neck Road.

Morris: I see.

Eppig: It was a tremendous piece of property.

Morris: So you did visit the Wagstaff estate. What are your memories about the estate?

Eppig: Well I remember old Mrs. Wagstaff very good. What a wonderful shot she was, cause when we used to fish for trout in her lake she used to shoot at us. But, she was very careful never to hit us and we knew that she was a good shot, so it never disturbed us when she shot at us cause we knew she was deliberately missing us. But she shot at us with a high powered rifle. She was quite an old lady.

Morris: The mansion must have been very large?

Eppig: Oh it was a very large mansion, yes. In fact, she didn't live in the mansion in her later part of her years, she lived in the gardener's cottage. And then when the mansion was empty and it was, it became very ramshackled before they finally tore it down.

Morris: Probably too much to keep it up.

Eppig: Oh, it was too much, too much help and everything to keep it up.

Morris: Probably when the depression came it was,

Eppig: No, she lived in the cottage over next to the lake.

Morris: Did you, um, every visit the McCurdy estate, that's the one where Eaton Lane is now.

Eppig: I used to have a hut on the island in the middle of the boat basin that, and that island was there until they decided to develop the south part of the McCurdy estate, and they pumped that island out down and around to the land down there to fill in the land. That's what happened to that island. But I used to have a hut on the island and the caretaker of the McCurdy estate thought I was a nice boy and he let me have it there.

Morris: I heard something about a race track in the area.

Eppig: Well, that was in the McCurdy estate. The race track was Belmont's practice track once in the McCurdy, it was the McCurdy estate. In fact, the house that's right to the south, north of us here, Hudson's house was the dormitory for the jockeys that raced the horses on the practice tract that August Belmont had there.

Morris: That would be number 147 Eaton Lane and I presume it's the oldest house on the street. The jockeys that raced the horses on the Belmont race track lived in that house. Uh, where did you go to school?

Eppig: I went to Babylon Grammar school, elementary school.

Morris: But you lived in West Islip.

Eppig: But I lived in West Islip, but the Higbie Lane school when I was a boy was like a 3 room school, and my parents wanted me to be in individual classes so I went to the Babylon school, and it was very fortunate for me cause the Babylon school was very excellent in those days. They had a teacher in the 7th and 8th grade when was the, the 7th and 8th grade had teachers for math and English, and it was run like a high school was run, it was a very sort of advanced grammar school, and they had a math teacher in the, that Jr. high school if you want to call it that, was Mrs. Pullis. Mrs. Pullis was an absolute genius as a math teacher. She was so good that when I went to high school, I had to take algebra over again I never made a single mistake, and the algebra teacher thought I knew more algebra than he did. He was, he was, she was first rate.

Morris: I understand that you became a very prominent chemical engineer with Pfizer. Um, during the war, did you go into the service?

Eppig: Well when the draft took place I was number 3 in the draft in West Islip, and I went in and told my boss that and my boss got a man from the navy yard to come in and talk to me, and the fellow from the navy yard decided that I should not go into the service. And he came out and he talked to the draft board out here about putting me in 2B and making me a 2B because I was in an essential industry. We were making Vitamin C, we were running a Vitamin C plant. And, my boss was a business man and I was the technical brains of the department and he would work in the office all of the time and I ran the plant all the time. But then it was very fortunate for me because as soon as the war got under way, the English invented Penicillin and we bought the penicillin culture from the English, and the English told us that we had to do it in flat flasks and about quart size flasks. But we couldn't see that and the first thing we did was we shut our phenothalien department down and we got 4 steel tanks, 2000 gallons each and we made them into fermenters. So the first penicillin we did, we did it in 2000 gallon tanks and that's how we started the penicillin thing and then we built a plant in Brooklyn and it was really thrilling times when Alexander Fleming came to talk to us from England. He wanted to know what we were. And he found out that I was a country boy that had become a chemical engineer.

Morris: And now I understand that you are retired, and so what are you doing in your retirement, how are you keeping busy?

Eppig: Well I raise geraniums, I raise almost 1000 geraniums each year and I donate them to the hospital, and I also raise a lot of tomato plants. I was on a tour in South America a few years ago and we had a bus driver stop and he made us get out of the bus and he said, "The reason the why I wanted you people to get out of the bus, I wanted you to taste the wild tomatoes here." And he made us taste some wild tomatoes that were growing. And these tomatoes were just as big as my little finger, but they were so sweet, I said to my wife, "Give me a Kleenex quick." And I took about six of the ripest ones and I squeezed them into a Kleenex and I got the seed, and I've been growing that tomato here for about six years now, but about oh 5

years or so ago, I had a wild tomato come up in a geranium pot, and I put it on the center bench in my greenhouse and it took root through the bottom of the pot and I couldn't pick it up when I went to take it away and I left it there. That plant grew in my greenhouse for two years and I picked tomatoes from it. Now these tomatoes were about as big as marbles. They were bigger than the little wild one, but they were just as sweet as the wild one, and since that time I've got people coming from all over to get plants of that variety from me. It's my own variety, I call it the Ed Eppig Special.

Morris: So the Eppig Gardens is still intact here. Oh that's lovely. It was a very important part, Eppig Gardens is a very important part of West Islip even today, and I want to thank you, Mr. Eppig, for this very interesting interview this afternoon.

Now we'd like to talk a little bit to Mrs. Eppig who has lived in the area for many years also, and like to find out something about her memories of this area.

Morris: Mrs. Eppig, uh, what are some of the outstanding things that you remember about this area when you were growing up?

Eppig: I was brought here as a summer resident when I was two weeks old, so we lived in the same house on Hunter Avenue. Across the road from us were very large meadows, fields that went down the distance of what would be six city blocks, and um, that was um, used by the dairy, local dairy farm, for the feeding of the cows. And the cows were brought everyday to that spot and then they were brought down the road to the stream that divides Babylon and Islip. And then they were watered there twice a day and then they were brought back to their barn. Now in the same field, which is very level and very clear cause it was grazed on, uh, it was a natural place for any kind of gathering, and one night in the very early 20's perhaps 22 or 23, we looked out and saw across the, in the meadow there, an enormous cross burning. And my mother and my aunt were rather intrepid of we thought, but nevertheless, out they went, and I wasn't allowed to accompany them cause it was at night, and what they said is that they approached this group of men, of course they were all Ku Klux Klanners, all in their hoods and white robes. There was one man who was exceptionally tall, my mother was able to identify him because he was the son of the farmer and cause he knew my mother and my aunt too, and he warned them, he said, "you've got to get out of here." And it was obvious to them that the men had guns, so I guess my mother had a few words with him and then she returned home. But that cross burned for many hours cause that was the last thing I had seen. The next day there was no comment from anybody. No body spoke of the thing I guess my mother and my aunt, nobody had seen it burn there. There were no houses around there so there were not that many people, but when you go back to the dairy farm, they didn't know anything about this. But afterwards we found that almost all the men in the area were members of the Klan. I couldn't....

Morris: In the Babylon area that is.

Eppig: Oh that's right. In the houses around, they probably came from far and wide because it was a large gathering. And the whole atmosphere of the place was Anti-Klan, Anti-Catholic rather. I don't mean by that any hostility because I think having come from the city we thought {___} so there was no, no incidents occurred after that.

Morris: So unfortunately prejudice was a factor in the area?

Eppig: oh definitely.

Morris: Do you remember anything about the area, about the grounds around West Islip?

Eppig: Yes I do, on the east side of the stream that divided Babylon and Islip

Morris: Babylon and West Islip

Eppig: Babylon and West Islip in an area near where the Sunrise now crosses that stream there are trees along both sides of it and you were always able to walk along the trees and hunt for Indian artifacts and were able to find flints and arrowheads.

Morris: I understand that there was a very large estate bordering on the west edge of West Islip called the Guggenheim estate. Did you ever visit that estate?

Eppig: Never formally. I never knew the owner, who he was, and he would ride by on horseback and you were able to identify him and he would tip his hat. But from the rear of our house you could walk up an old path to the lake that was on his property, it was the eastern end of his property, probably a mile from his house, and that, the water of that lake probably flowed into the Babylon Creek that divides Islip.

Morris: West Islip

Eppig: West Islip and Babylon. And on it, this lake, there were different structures, one would be a boat house and one was an ice house. I don't remember what the other, there was a mill, this was a little stream there, it went over the very tiny dam, it wasn't much, but. It was far enough away from his house so he wasn't bothered by the mechanics running the estate. It was not kept up very well, It was allowed to grow, to be overgrown. He called this his firenze farm.

Morris: Firenze farm?

Eppig: F-I-R-E-N-Z-E.

Morris: Where did he get that name?

Eppig: Well, you know it means Florence in Italian, and now, there is a Mrs. Guggenheim who lives in Venice and she has an art gallery there. I think she calls that the Firenze. I don't know what she calls it, a gallery or palace. I don't know what, but the word Firenze was used in it and I'm sure it must come from the original farm there which was called Firenze farms.

Morris: Was the mansion on the Guggenheim estate so large and beautiful?

Eppig: No, it was very large, but it was right on on Deer Park Avenue. You know it was just a short drive in, it was very visible.

Morris: Where there any other estates that you remember in West Islip

Eppig: Yes, I remember on Hunter Avenue in West Islip there was a large estate, it was approached by a very very long winding road tree lined up to a big house and that was owned by the Oaks. I don't know whether these people were part who ran the times cause I was very little girl. But that, when I was very little, they had maids for their children and they used to walk them out of Hunter Avenue and that didn't continue very long, and that became a skeet club in West Islip. There's things I remember that wood fence that bounded the entire property. It was just a board. One at the top and one halfway and it was painted dark red and it ran the entire length of the north side of Hunter Avenue and then it turned and it went up north around the tree lined road but went up to the house.

Morris: And that was their fence?

Eppig: Yes

Morris: Well, Mrs. Eppig, thank you very much for giving us a picture of the area when you were young. It was a pleasure to meet you.