

William Gerek



This interview on March 17, 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 Mr. William Gerek, who was born and raised in West Islip.

Morris: Mr. Gerek, where did your parents come from?

Gerek: My parents came from the Ukraine, which at that time was part of the Austria-Hungary Empire.

Morris: And when?

Gerek: During the early 1900s.

Morris: They came over here during the early 1900s. Did your father come right to West Islip?

Gerek: No, my father came to his brother Victor Gerek, who was superintendent of the Hyatt Estate which was located on the northern side of Montauk Highway in West Bay Shore.

Morris: Is that where the Southward Ho Country Club is now?

Gerek: It's slightly west of the Southward Ho Country Club and included the golf course which was on the side of the Ismerson Farm and the present Seascape Condominiums.

Morris: And was it where the Admiralty Condominiums were too, across the street?

Gerek: It joined the Admiralty Condominiums which was the corner estate

Morris: Where were you born?

Gerek: I was born here in West Islip on Higbie Lane in the house that is presently being remodeled by Dr. Fas which is located north of Mr. Walter Dunham and south of Thomas Casey.

Morris: Were you, did you grow up in that house or did you...

Gerek: No, I was born in that house and then for a year or so my parents lived on Union Avenue. At about the age of 5 they bought a tract of land that was located on Udall Road and Higbie Lane.

Morris: The tract of land ran from Udall Road?

Gerek: The tract of land ran from Udall Road all the way to Higbie Lane. My father developed this area and put the present Gerek Ave through the middle of the property.

Morris: And, what did he use the property for?

Gerek: Well he used the property for farming. And in time he developed quite an extensive flower-growing business.

Morris: I see. So then you moved to Udall Road. What number?

Gerek: We moved to 60 Udall Road. And lived in a house that my father moved from N. Babylon which was a part of Guggenheim's Laundry. He enlarged this building and after a number of years, my father built the present home which is located on the corner of Gerek and Udall Road.

Morris: Guggenheim Laundry, do you mean Guggenheim, was that part of the Guggenheim estate?

Gerek: That laundry was part of the Guggenheim Estate. When they started to take the estate apart, my father took the laundry and moved it here to West Islip.

Morris: And added on to it, and it is now number 60 Udall Road?

Gerek: Right.

Morris: So your father had an extensive, he must have been the first flower growing business?

Gerek: My father was the first Ukrainian flower grower. As you know many other Ukrainians later grew flowers commercially also.

Morris: um, hum.

Gerek: My father sent the flowers to the NYC flower market.

Morris: Did he grow flowers on that one piece of property or did he have other pieces of property in West Islip?

Gerek: He started growing on this farm and later he bought another farm where presently Roderick Ave. is. Later he bought a farm on Wagstaff Lane and then he leased and rented many other farms in West Islip.

Morris: So he owned many hundreds of acres I would say?

Gerek: He owned many acres.

Morris: Many acres, right. Where did you go to school?

Gerek: I went to the West Islip Public School that was located in front of the present Higbie Lane School that is used as a Senior Citizen Center. This building was in front of the Higbie Lane School, a wooden structure that had two out houses in the rear.

Morris: How many rooms were in the school?

Gerek: At the time I went there were 7 rooms in the school.

Morris: Were athletics important when you grew up?

Gerek: Athletics was a very important factor in my growing up. I enjoyed it very much, in fact that was our social outlet.

Morris: Did you have good teams?

Gerek: West Islip always had good teams. And the West Islipians excelled in all types of sports.

Morris: Hasn't changed. What were some of the cultural activities of the Ukrainian people in the early days?

Gerek: Well, during the early days and number of Ukrainians, we got together and formed the Ukrainian Club. They built the Ukrainian Center on Hawley Ave. that still exists to this day on Hawley Avenue. The Ukrainians formed this club where they had many concerts, plays and other social dances and activities. They also operated a school that taught the children how to read and write using the Celeric alphabet. I myself learned to read and write Ukrainian from my mother and my attendance at this school.

Morris: Speaking of cultural activities, the West Islip Public Library is an important part of our community today. Uh, what do you know about the very beginning of the West Islip Library?

Gerek: Well I can trace the beginning of the library to where my father moved part of the Lawrence estate farm to West Islip and he changed it to a garage. He sold this garage to Mr. Dzus who in turn invented the Dzus banter and fastener.

Morris: And then?

Gerek: And then I continued to expand his business.

Morris: That was the building that your father moved from the Lawrence estate?

Gerek: And this was the building that my father moved from the Lawrence estate.

Morris: To Hawley Ave?

Gerek: To Hawley Ave.

Morris: and then sold it to Mr. Dzus?

Gerek: and then sold it to Mr. Dzus, who in turn changed it to a garage. And in the garage, he developed a fastener and in time he gave the building to the library.

Morris: A very auspicious beginning for a library. So your father was a very important part of our community. He had a very extensive flower growing business you said. Um, during WWII did he have a problem getting labor to run this business?

Gerek: Well, he did, but during WWII, uh, the LIRR imported over 3 or 400 Mexicans to work on the RR. During the off hours, my father hired 40 or 50 of these Mexicans to help grow flowers.

Morris: All the way from Mexico. Where did these Mexicans live?

Gerek: The Mexicans lived in small little shacks that were built on the RR yard.

Morris: Mr. Gerek, I know that you were an administrator and an assistant superintendent of schools in the West Islip system for 18 years. Do you have any knowledge of what a school budget was like many many years ago, what the amount of the school budget was many years ago?

Gerek: Well, off hand, this is not exact, but pretty close. In about 1887, the budget was about \$700, the tax rate was about 15 cents per 100 dollars of tax valuation.

Morris: What was the teacher's salary in those days, 1887?

Gerek: The teacher's salary, Mrs. Kellum, who was a teacher and principal, received \$500 per year.

Morris: How many students were there in 1887.

Gerek: There were less than 35 students.

Morris: Can you compare that to what is happening today in West Islip in 1982. What's the present budget, approximately?

Gerek: Well the present budget is slightly over 28 million dollars and the tax rate is roughly \$3.71 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

Morris: That is quite a difference. How many students do we have today?

Gerek: Presently we have about 6800 students, but in 1970 we had close to 9500 students.

Morris: That was the most that we ever had, 9500 in 1970.

Gerek: yes, yes.

Morris: When do you say that the population, the school population, increased the fastest?

Gerek: The school population increased the fastest during the late 1950s. In 1960 the population grew to 6000 students from about 119 in 1931.

Morris: So in 1931 there were about 100.

Gerek: About 100 students in grades Kindergarten through Grade 8.

Morris: And then in 1970 it grew to 9500.

Gerek: 1970 saw the peak and it grew to about...

Morris: 9500.

Gerek: 9500.

Morris: Unfortunately, we know that there is much vandalism in our community today. When you were growing up, was this a problem?

Gerek: No, this was not a problem. The only vandalism we had, occasionally a window would be broken accidentally and the parents would replace or pay for the window and punish the child.

Morris: What happened to the last amount of acreage that your father owned in West Islip for the farms?

Gerek: Originally he sold much of this land due to the exodus of the people from the cities and the development of this part of the community.

Morris: For homes?

Gerek: For homes. Later on after my parents passed away, taxes forced us to sell the farm for another development.

Morris: Is there any part of the farm at all that is left?

Gerek: yeah, a small part of the farm.

Morris: on Udall Road?

Gerek: On Udall Road. It is still being operated by my brother. He has the original greenhouse and he still grows geraniums and sells them to the public.

Morris: Mr. Gerek, if you had your life to live over again, would you choose to live it in West Islip?

Gerek: I enjoyed living in West Islip. I was able to get close to nature, to live in the open spaces, to fish and enjoy the seashore and enjoy the various activities here on the island. And, also being close and being able to enjoy the culture of Metropolitan New York.

Morris: Thank you very much Mr. Gerek for enlightening us about the early days in West Islip.

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