

Thomas Horan



This interview in March 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. Thomas Horan, who has lived in West Islip since 1909.

Morris: Mr. Horan, I understand that you were born in 1909 in this house that you are still living, on Higbie Lane, #102. Can you tell me something about the history of this house?

Horan: Well, the nearest I can recall from my people, this house was moved from the Higbie Estate which is on Merrick Road in West Islip as a barn, bought to its present site and converted into a home which was sold to Richard A Udall who in turn sold it to Richard W. Udall on March 17th 1877. My mother, no, Mr. Udall had passed away and the house was left to his niece, Elsie Lawrence, who in return sold it to Walter Paprocki, and my mother rented the home from Mr. Paprocki for a number of years. And then on October 5, 1927 my mother purchased the home and I've been here all my life, born and raised here.

Morris: You mentioned Walter Paprocki - there's a Paprocki Blvd. in West Islip...

Horan: That's right. Well, Walter Paprocki was a man who owned a large piece of property north of the railroad track off Higbie Lane which consists of Paprocki Ave., Oakwood Ave., and West Islip Blvd. He also owned it on the left hand side, north of the railroad track, from the railroad track to Kurzon Road and several homes. He had run a saloon years ago when I was a little boy in West Islip, that is where he made all of his money.

Morris: I see. Um, do you, um, have memories of the first school in West Islip?

Horan: Yes, the first schools started in the lot which I now called George Street, corner of George Street. It was a two room school with a teacher by the name of Mrs. Ketchum. My father and his brothers and sister all went to that school. Then they built another school on the sight where the present Higbie Lane school is now. And, the Col. Wagstaff in return bought the old school which he had moved across the lot to what is now known as DeBois Road down by the high school, and converted it to a home where his head gardener, Poppy Johnson, who lived there until his decease, and I can remember also as well, I was only a young boy, about 10 or 11 years old, going to the wooden school when a man by the name of Howard Gamole had a moving business and he had the contract to move the school and got 50 cents every afternoon to chase a horse around, around the Niggerhead, I don't know if this is going to sound all right, around Niggerhead, to pull the school across on Greased planks. And I couldn't wait to get out of school. So if anybody is interested in seeing the little old school all they have to do is go down to Debois road, it's the last place on the right hand side.

Morris: And that's the original two room school house?

Horan: That's the original two room school house in West Islip who had a teacher, Ms. Ketchum.

Morris: And, um, people are living in the house now?

Horan: That's correct.

Morris: That's intersting. Debois Road and it's the last house on the right

Horan: on the right.

Morris: Very interesting. I don't think many people know that. Did the students ever get into mischief in those days in school?

Horan: Well, I couldn't tell you too much about how much they got into to, but I do recall my parents, my father and his brothers talking about when they wanted to get a long weekend. Then when the school closed on Friday some of the boys would stuff the chimney in the little old school, which they had a pot bellied stove in, and when it came Monday morning when Ms. Ketchum wanted to start the stove up, they'd have bags and rags and everything stuffed down the chimney, so by the time they got them out, the kids had Monday off, so they got an extra day off.

Morris: I understand that at one time, West Islip was composed mainly by large estates, owned by very wealthy people. Do you have any memories of anyone who worked on those estates?

Horan: The one I have most the memories off would be the Montici-Keith estate.

Morris: Where was that?

Horan: Which was located directly across the street from where Good Samaritan Hospital is now.

Morris: Excuse me, how large was that estate, where did it extend from?

Horan: Well it went from Keith Lane to Chapey's Funeral Home, present, Chapey's funeral home now, and then it went clean all the way north across the tract up to Bay Shore Road. He owned all that property up to the woods. It was all woods at that time.

Morris: Several thousand acres.

Horan: That's right. And he had on of the largest chicken farms, largest food orchard and also the largest dairy on Long Island. Which he was commercialized. There he sold milk from house to house on a route. Also butter, eggs, chickens.

Morris: Drawn by horses the milk route.

Horan: Well, yes, from that to first Model T when the first come out, Model T Fords.

Morris: How did Mr. Keith make his money.

Horan: From what I understand, he was a stock broker as well as he owned an United Fruit Lines which was in Central America, in Costa Rica. My father worked there as a dairy man, and in the winter time when Mr. Keith moved into the city, into the Waldorf, my family would live in the big house as caretaker for the winter, and then we would move back to West Islip in the summer when they came out, but my father worked there year round.

Morris: Mr. Keith lived in the Waldorf hotel all winter. Oh I see, he had rooms in the...

Horan: Yeah, he had the whole top floor.

Morris: Oh he had the whole top floor of the Waldorf. That's interesting. How did your, when your father wasn't living on the estate, how did he get to work?

Horan: why he had to walk to work. In the winter time he walked to work on account of the snow and stuff, but the summer time most of these men from West Islip that depended upon these big estates, rode bicycles.

Morris: Well he would have to leave for work early if he was taking care of the cattle.

Horan: He used to leave here anywheres 4:15-4:20 in the morning. Then he would come home around 10:00 for breakfast, the he'd got back to the dairy and he'd be there until around 6:00 in the evening.

Morris: Did any of your other relatives work on any of the estates in this area?

Horan: No, the only relative I had, I had a grandfather, Patrick Horan, who worked for the Hawley estate. And Hawley was the president of the Pennsylvania RailRoad. The Hawley estate is now known as

Parkwood Lakes. He was a gardener there and also raised deer for Hawley and he was gored to death by the deer that he had raised.

Morris: How did that happen?

Horan: Well he used to go up every morning to feed the deer and they had boxes that they used to put the food in, wooden boxes, and he was cleaning the wooden boxes out. Of course he had been warned to keep an eye on the old buck. And, of course he turned his back this morning and the buck, apparently the doe was in season, and the buck apparently thought he was coming in to take the doe out and he come up behind him and gored him to death.

Morris: Mr. Horan as a child growing up, what were your chores or household responsibilities?

Horan: Well, as a, one of the main things was to, we had a big wood box behind the old kitchen stove which had to be filled every night with wood so that my mother would have wood there to start the fire at 4:00 in the morning when my father was getting up to go to work to see that he would have something to eat. If that box wasn't filled with wood, believe me, I was out of bed to look for wood.

Morris: Dragged out of bed.

Horan: Yeah, dragged out of bed to look for wood to start that fire. Well, of course, at that hour in the morning the only thing that I could find, going down Higbie Lane which was south of where I lived, Wagstaff had a big estate on the left hand side and they had a boarded fence. Well, I had that fence pretty well torn down from taking the wood when I didn't get up to get that fire going. Then I also, in the winter time we had three pigs we used to raise here, and uh, of course my job was to make sure that the pig pen was kept clean. It had a wooden floor because we lived along side of the school and my father wanted no odor, whatsoever, coming from that pig pen. Every afternoon after school I had to clean it and clean it had to be. And then also I had to go get the garbage at the McCurdy Estate which is now known as Sequams Colony. I had a wagon with two big garbage cans. I used to go down everyday to get them full and bring it home to feed the pigs, Saturday, Sunday, everyday of the week.

Morris: Oh wow, so you didn't have such an easy time as a child.

Horan: Well, then he'd also leave a list. We had a garden area, he would leave a list of what I was to do when he went to work and believe me it had to be done. There was many of times the rest of the boys would come down and say, "Come on Tom, let's go down Eaton's, we're going swimming. We'll give you a hand when we come back." But by the time we got done swimming and come back they were in no mood to give me a hand. Believe me when my father would come home he would say, "What about this, what about that." So of course I knew what the consequences was gonna be and that was it.

Morris: What did you do for fun as a child, I know you played on the estates and you swam.

Horan: Well we played baseball, football, of course we didn't have a football. Years ago we would, every October or November they would slaughter the pigs, and most people here raised pigs for food for the winter, and they would slaughter the pigs, different homes, and we'd run around and get the bladder of the pig and we would dry that and then blow it up and use it as a football until it was wore out.

Morris: Quite a difference from today.

Horan: Better believe it, I'll tell you the kids today have it made.

Morris: Well in spite of the fact that you did have a lot of responsibilities as a child, and it wasn't all that easy, if you had to live your life over again, would you choose to grow up here in West Islip?

Horan: Yes, I would, I love West Islip, and it was always very nice, beautiful big estates on the Merrick Road, and the people all knew one another, and if they didn't they were married and the families were married to one another, and they were related, and when someone was in trouble or sick they were always right there to help one another. When someone passed away, they were right there. If you needed a hand or

needed anything they were always right there to give it to you. So I would say yes, I would like to live my life over again in West Islip.

Morris: Well that's very nice, we're glad. Thanks very much for a very interesting interview.