

John Stanton



This interview on March 3, 1982 is part of an Oral History of West Islip project, sponsored by the West Islip Library. I am Ethel Morris of the library staff and I will interview John Stanton, who has lived in West Islip since 1907

Morris: Mr. Stanton, in the early 1900s West Islip consisted mainly of large estates owned by very wealthy people I understand. Who owned the estate where the Good Samaritan Hospital is now?

Stanton: Oh that particular estate belonged to John Van Der Beer. His daughter married John Gibson which turned the property over to the hospital people.

Morris: It encompassed a large area?

Stanton: Well it runs from Montauk Highway (which we never used to call it Montauk we used to call it South Country Road) and goes all the way down right through the water's edge. I would estimate that'd be perhaps 100 acres or approximately that.

Morris: Where did your father work?

Stanton: My father worked for Mrs. Annie S. Arnold on the Arnold Estate and was employed as a coachman.

Morris: What did a coachman do?

Stanton: A coachman used to run all the errands years ago for the whole estate, there was no such thing as chauffeurs them days, I'm talking now very early 1900s. And the coachman used to go down and get the mail and do the deliveries and pick up the help and take the employees to mass.

Morris: With the horses?

Stanton: With the horses, oh yes.

Morris: And what was his salary?

Stanton: I don't recall exactly. But I would say I don't think he ever at the time ever received more than 40 dollars a month.

Morris: How did you get along? How did you manage with 40 dollars a month?

Stanton: We got along very well because you must understand that 40 dollars with a house, with the electricity, light and your milk and groceries and eggs and so forth from the estate, why you didn't need too much money. And we got along pretty well. Never made much money, but had a lot of fun.

Morris: The estate provided everything?

Stanton: Yes.

Morris: And what happened in the winter time when the estate owners would go into the city. Did your family go with them?

Stanton: Oh yes that was part of my fathers job was to drive the horses that go in and all the family would go in and bring your pet, we had a pet cat. Put that in the trunk underneath the seat. And we would go in, in the wintertime, yes, over the 59th Street bridge with a horse and wagon.

Morris: Where did they live in the city?

Stanton: On Park Avenue.

Morris: Park Avenue, comfortable childhood. The large estates, everyone in West Islip seemed to work on one of the large estates, that was the only business around?

Stanton: Well I don't recall too many places, well there was electric companies and gas companies and water, but the majority of the people worked on the estates. The people that settled in the West Islip area were people that worked on most of the estates and there was quite a list of estates years ago on the highway.

Morris: How did they get to work?

Stanton: Bicycle. That was the main supply years ago. They either walked or rode a bike.

Morris: So I guess the highway was crowded with bicycles when they..?

Stanton: Oh yes, well there was only a real narrow road on the so-called South Country Road because of the, it was a macadam road, there wasn't much traffic on it.

Morris: Did they all get out of work at the same time?

Stanton: Yes, most of them would quit at 4 to 4:30. And of course you would see them coming out of particularly the E.W.C. Arnold Estate which was across the way from Mrs. Arnold's where I lived. There would be probably twenty, twenty five bike riders all going home coming up to...and most of them lived in the vicinity of West Islip here up I guess you could call it Higbie Lane. Everything that we knew them days, there was no such thing as side streets or anything, everything was Higbie Lane.

Morris: That was the only..?

Stanton: Yeah you walked up to Higbie Lane. And you had a couple little stores in West Islip at that time.

Morris: When did these big estates start to break up?

Stanton: Well the first one that I can recall breaking was the C.F. Hubbs, and his son-in-law Kettles decided that he wanted to go to the north shore. I would say in the vicinity of 1924 to 25 I believe they sold it to Mr. Policina called the Babylon Beach Estate in later years. That one broke up from the Montauk Highway to the bay. That was another one. Most of the estates did run right to the bay.

Morris: Right down to the bay?

Stanton: Yes.

Morris: Uhhuh. Why do you think the estates broke up? You said they moved to Northshore, Brookville, that area?

Stanton: That's right, that where they mostly all went to.

Morris: Why did they move there?

Stanton: Well I think that had a real classy appearance. I think West Islip started to get a little run down and people started complaining about their taxes and big estates and they bought smaller places and moved over to the north shore I would say. I don't really know the real reason why they done it, except they all seemed to be complaining about their taxes, and that hasn't changed because they're still complaining about their taxes.

Morris: Um, how has West Islip changed as a result?

Stanton: Well, West Islip. now has some great businesses in it when you take into consideration up here and Higbie Lane and in that vicinity, and gas stations down at the corner of Oak Neck Lane and restaurants, mostly restaurants. So that's about all I can say about it changing, of course you get a great class of people that own nice homes now in West Islip, and they payin' a lot of tax. Of course they'll be good for 20 or 30 years and then they'll be makin' changes again.

Morris: Um, do you remember the hurricane of 1938?

Stanton: Oh, yes, I remember that very well. We were drivin' through it there. I was in the automobile business at that time. That's at 1938 we were sellin' Dodge and trucks and of course we serviced cars and we had a fairly large service station and naturally we got a lot of calls due to the water, the rain and the high tides. The tides was up, I would guess without measuring, about 4 feet above normal which brought it up to the highways. Eaton Lane, there was water, you could almost sail a boat all the way from Montauk to the bay. And uh, it affected a lot of people, but we were, fortunately there was no loss of life. I know when you walked down towards the water which we were all interested, you saw the Babylon Bathing Beach cabanas and summer camps and everything floating around the bay. They were washed right over.

Morris: Furniture and everything?

Stanton: Everything went; yeah there was an awful lot of damage done. We had no flood insurance them days, we didn't know what flood insurance was, but like everything else you get accustomed to anything after awhile.

Morris: It was a very devastating hurricane. Um, do you have any other memories you would like to talk about, life on the estate, what kind of recreation you engaged in as a child living on the estate.

Stanton: Well in the later years on the estate we had caddying at the old South Shore Field Club and of course we played a lot of golf. And I still play a little.

Morris: I understand you're quite good.

Stanton: Not good really, not as good as I'd like to be, but a lot of the boys were very good that I know. Mr. Ryan was a very fine golfer. And of course we didn't have the facilities to play the kind of sports they have now. We had no gym and no inside where we could play basketball. You went to Babylon and if you wanted to play basketball you played outside with one hoop to throw it in.

Morris: How did you celebrate holidays on the estate? Did your family ever get together with the owner, the Arnolds, the owner of the estate on Christmas or any of the other holidays?

Stanton: Well they did come around and wish ya a happy Christmas and New Year and so forth. They were very nice to work for; I could say nothing but the finest of Mrs. Annie S. Arnold.

Morris: Did they ever have parties for the workers?

Stanton: No, that was a no, no years ago. I don't ever recall having any kind of a party, maybe a birthday party or something like that, but I don't recall anything like that. No they didn't do those things them days.

Morris: But you had a nice childhood?

Stanton: I would say it was excellent, if you like it I couldn't complain about it. We had everything but money. You didn't really need money if you had everything free. And that was about the answer.

Morris: That was all provided for in the estate?

Stanton: Yeah

Morris: So if you had your life to live over again you would choose to live...?

Stanton: I wouldn't hesitate to do the very same thing over again. Yeah you see and hear all about these people that become so wealthy that I don't know what the hell you do with it. If you did have it you never got in real trouble. I enjoyed West Islip. I served on the school board and had a lot of fun on that board.

Morris: You contributed to our community I know that. Well that was a very interesting interview Mr. Stanton and I'd like to thank you very much for giving up your valuable time.

Stanton: Thank you very much, I'm happy to do it and if I can help you ever again, don't hesitate to give me...(end tape.)