

## Harry Weinstein



*This interview on 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. Harry Weinstein. He was one of the old time residents of our community and a person who is very influential in the progress of the community. He was president of the school board for 8 years. He was a founder of the West Islip Library and was responsible of the purchase of the land where the library now stands. He was active in many other West Islip activities.*

*Harry, when did you come to Long Island?*

We started to come to Long Island in 1908...in Lindenhurst in 1912. I attended school in West Islip and graduated grade school. And at the tender age of 14 my stepmother started a \_\_\_ business. And I found myself involved in working but in order to meet as young people were then dedicated to whatever the family wanted you to do you did. In 1918 the business was sold to the Great Steamship Company operating a series of branches under an agency company. ...which was involved primarily in bringing in \_\_\_ from Chile and therefore concentrating and using that as a part of the building of formulas for fertilizing. And as much as Long Island was in those days agricultural, very \_\_\_ area, and also involved in chemicals for spraying etc. They bought the feed plants, they had several of them along Long Island, from Glen Cove to Riverhead. And so my dad sold his business, and although I didn't know at my tender age I was engaged as a manager.

*What age was that?*

It was, to be truthful, 18. And after being their employee as a manager starting in Amityville and closing down the Lindenhurst plant. Within the next 6 months, we closed down the Amityville plant and I took over the Babylon area, the Babylon plant being familiar to me all of this territory. And shortly after they asked me to absorbly follow their plant. Therefore within the 11 months that I was their employee, I had taken over into the Babylon area, the Babylon plant, Lindenhurst, Amityville, and Farmingdale.

*OK, lets backtrack a minute. You said for the first few years you received nothing on your first job. After that, how much did you earn?*

Well for one year, I got \$2.50 a week.

*A week!*

A week. And then when my father took me in as a partner I got \$5 a week.

*\$5 a week, double your salary.*

And for that sum, I was up at 6 in the morning, milked the cow, fed the chickens, harvest team of houses, and worked until well nights, after dark, whenever I completed my route or made my deliveries from Lindenhurst straight through to Bayshore on the one hand, and from Lindenhurst to Amityville, Farmingdale on the other hand. So that, in those days, it was nothing to put a full day of work in. It was not uncommon. And we were also taught fortunately or unfortunately, that if you don't work, you don't eat. That made a difference because you couldn't live as long as you think.

*So the first business that you started was where? And what was it?*

The plant that I bought from the agency, or the Steamship Company, was one that they had originally bought from the feed company on Deer Park Avenue.

The feed business.

And they handled feeding and fertilizing. It was just 2 weeks before my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, on July 21<sup>st</sup>, so on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1921 very little money but a lot of ambition so the decision was that I would rather build with a small community and go back to New York to start another area or undertaking that may be more to my liking because of less labor. But, having weighed the decision that I would work hard as a young man, and enjoy the benefits of relation on some future date, I decide to build with the community. We expanded to John Street, which was a dirt road from Babylon leading to Higbie Lane. And there we were able to rent part of an old ice cream factory for expansion. But as time went on, the business grew to the extent where expansion beyond that point was necessary in order to have sufficient product to take care of the area. We then bought land from the Robbins family on John Street in what is now known as West Islip, but was then known as Higbie Lane. This land we had to clear and because it was rather swampy and low, we had to firm up my fill that would be solid and able to carry the weight of buildings and equipment. With an old auto car, solid tire, motor, a chain, we pulled down the trees and by bringing in cars from the Long Island Rail Road of Jamaica we eventually filled the ground. And for our first warehouse, we manually, my father Martin and myself, took apart a building on the Foster Estate on Little East Neck Road, and used the materials to build our first solid warehouse. The office built in 1923 still stands. The warehouse has been rebuilt.

*Exactly where is that office? On John Street...*

Unfortunately it has been burned because of the past few months. But it stands opposite and will be rebuilt I hope, the junction of Hawley and Union, or John Street.

*How did you deliver your feed?*

When I first went into business, I purchased a horse wagon and a Ford truck which was a ton and half truck with a solid tire in which traveled between here and New York to bring products back to the island. The use of the horse and wagon, and the need for a horse and wagon was very great in those days. It would be surprising to know that most of the main affairs with the exceptions of Merrick Road and Deer Park Avenue were dirt roads. Once you got off the immediate heavily populated area, there were dirt roads. And you say why the horse? Well, the horses were able to maneuver a wagon through the side roads which were so muddy in the spring that I recall even at this time, a team of horses on Belmont Road having to have Belmont's team come and hook on the same as we would as a tractor today so that the four animals could pull a load from Deer Park Avenue into the estate. Now that sounds rather funny, but believe me, that was necessary or they could not move anything whatsoever. Higbie Lane, as I refer to it, being accustomed to it was inhabited by the working class. The majority of the people worked on estates.

*I understand that as times changed, you expanded your line of products and sold coal kerosene and oil. Do you remember how much a gallon of oil sold for in those days?*

Well in 1925 I added coal because of the number of estates that were in the area. Dairy and poultry farms were diminishing in the area. I added coal to keep my help on 52 weeks of the year. Then in 1932 found that people were tending toward oil and I added oil to my product. At that time oil was about 8 ½ cents a gallon and kerosene about 9 ½ possibly 10 cents a gallon.

*As opposed to a dollar eighteen now. What effect did the depression have on your business, Harry?*

Fortunately, because I always managed to keep my business liquid and not spend as if I really could afford it for safety measures it did not affect our ability to continue to serve in the past. However, we did find that the conditions were such that the average working man, having been accustomed to living within the means of his earnings, was the ones that were entitled to all of cooperation and help you could give them financially was to credit. Unfortunately, the people who were in the high brackets at that time, lived accordingly, and

there you found as a pitfall unfortunately because it was rather difficult for any of us to change the standard of living that people were becoming accustomed to. And we found that the people who lived in a royal of their own had to come down to unfortunately face the facts.

*I understand that you were responsible in your business for helping many local people through the hard times of the depression.*

Well in evaluating credit, one thing you have to understand was that the person who was living at the same means that we were earning at the time, the sweat of their brow, if you will, were entitled to be given a helping hand. They had never enjoyed, as most of us did not, the luxuries of being able to enjoy the better things in life without toil.

*Harry, you are known, unofficially, as West Islip's own poet. Will you read for us an original poem, one of the many of the original poems, but this original poem was written in honor of West Islip Founders Day.* I was asked to participate, as I am occasionally, on various local functions. And the West Islip Founders Day, and I must say that in order to fit the words to the occasion, I have to resort to a bit of research. But, what I did compose was West Islip Founders Day and conveyed this message.

“West Islip residents gather here to celebrate Founders Day  
Enjoy togetherness, relax, and to listen to what we have to say  
Surely since the day of the Secatogue Indians, there has been change  
The community cooperation surely should not be strange  
In 1692, the Sachem chief of the tribe we understand  
Sold the Willets Brothers and simply transferred this parcel of land  
Legal conveyance was a cloud of earth and a twig from a tree  
It was called turf and twig rather you will agree  
Came in by metal tools thus leaving the deal of restrictions free  
From the first history of West Islip the information I have named  
Our land was productive and mature, covered and nature covered it with green  
Picked berries, going wild off of fish,  
No need to go hungry, a bit of ambition to prepare your own dish  
Due to its beauty, agricultural and recreation facilities,  
Estates, large productive, everywhere used to be.  
Realizing that progress has brought many new families here  
Surely learning to work together in harmony in their good cheer  
Determined now that we will share and endeavor to do  
All you can to make ours a better community too.  
Yet, we will find so willing we can return much closer to you.”