

Daniel Zawyrucha

This interview on March 3, 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. Daniel Zawyrucha.

Mr. Zawyrucha, what were the nationalities of the people who lived in West Islip in the early 1900's?

Most of them were Irish, the English, the Ukrainians and a few Polish families.

Who were the most numerous?

I would say the Irish and Ukrainians.

Where did your parents work?

My father worked in the suburb of the estates during his lifetime. The estates he worked at on Merrick Road such as Akeensa Estate, Bonnells Estate, I just can't think of anymore right now. It's nonsense.

And what do they do on the estates?

Well, more or less they were specialists but actually they were laborers, handymen, gardeners. They was specialists in the way of doing things. They seemed able to know the earth and its natural environment. That's how they do it.

How much did your father earn on the estate?

Well it all how big of an estate it was. Usually depending it was 70 to 90 dollars a month.

A month?

A month, that's right.

And when was he paid?

At the end of the month.

The end of the month. So were they able to buy groceries, only getting paid once a month?

Well this was a thing. We had two or three stores in the neighborhood that sold foods and groceries, small amounts of meat, groceries. They were usually paid on a so called "book".

A book?

We had a little book that they put the money spent. At the end of the month they would come and after they got paid at the estates it would cover the money to pay the grocer.

The grocer wrote in the book how much was owed?

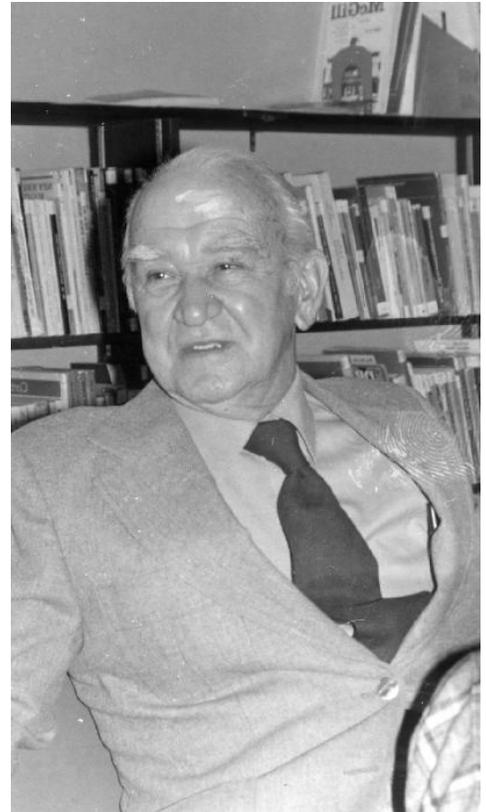
That's right.

And your father had a copy of uh...and then once a month, ...a credit..

They had to jibe more or less.

So credit was a very important part of living in those days.

Absolutely.



Even without credit cards, haha. What were some of the other occupations of some of the other people in the area? Was there a dairy farm where people worked? Or a fruit farm?

Well there were plenty of chicken farms and of course there was dairy farms up on North Sherman Ave. And there were...most of the estates had sometimes a little hobby, a bookkeeping tax deal. Some had chickens some had rabbits, a lot of rabbits, some kind of thing. Some had uh just plain poultry- turkeys, geese.

Were there any dairy farms other than those that were on the estate - did anyone else in the community have a dairy farm?

There was Sherman's dairy farm and of course there was Hokkison. He was there quite a while. They were located north of Udall Road. Hokkison's was on the corner of Higbie Lane and Sunrise Highway. That was a dairy farm at one time. And of course there was a small dairy that ran around the whole area. Some had cows, and stake those cows out in the open fields. There were a lot of open fields at that time.

So that Hokkison dairy farm was uh...

Yeah.

That's interesting.

Well there was quite a few people in the neighborhood that had a cow or two for their own milk. And as nature would have it the cow would solely signify that the belonger may one day visit somebody. And usually it would ____ all day long, which was a fact. She'd ____ all day long. Then we would know that she had to go to the bull.

Go to the bull, uh huh.

Hahahaha.

And was there a bull? Did anyone have a bull?

Hokkisons usually had a one bull and Sherman's had another bull. And they visit Hokkison's or Sherman's farm over there and they get five dollars for the service.

How did you have fun when you were growing up here?

Well, we never lacked something to do. We had fun. We played games, "huck chuck". We'd chase fellows maybe three or four miles but we would catch 'em. It was just like cops and robbers. And of course "roley poley" was a game played with a tennis ball and you roll it into a little cup type hole and you get ten lives and you either get it in the hole or ...it was, roley poley was a quite a popular game.

Did you do much skating?

Yes. There was quite a lot of skating. The winters seemed to be more severe. They had big lakes. Now of course they drained off with real estate but Hawely Lake was one of the big lakes we went skating. And also Wagstaff Lake, which is still there. Ice frozen used to be 14 to 18 inches thick.

Oh most of the winter?

Most of the winter. Every winter.

Every winter?

Every winter. There was never a winter without ice skating.

And so you skated on the Hawley Lake?

The Hawley Lake and the Wagstaff Lake.

The Wagstaff Lake, um hum. Is that ice used at all in the community for anything?

They used it. They owned an ice house.

The estate owners?

Yeah, the estate owners used that ice. They usually had their ice house. And they'd pile into the ice house they'd put salt hay or wood shavings in between the slabs and they'd be pulling in ice all summer long to cool their food with.

So they were able to store the ice in like a storehouse.

That's right. The ice house has no windows though. It was usually a cement type of building with a front opening like a little elevator and that was it. And they store the ice in that.

With salt or woodchips in between?

Salt HAY!

Salt hay.

Salt hay is a hay that grows in meadows and it has no seed or the seed does not escort into weeds. It won't grow in a garden. So they use that or wood shavings in between so that it wouldn't melt and also it wouldn't stick together.

So the ice would not melt. And then that way the ice would preserve all winter?

Well not *all* winter. Quite a part of the summer.

Part of the summer I mean. That's very interesting. Can you tell us what were some of your chores as a boy?

Well of course chores were never ending. Go get some wood out of the woods. We were able to cut down the huge tree, even at 10, 12 years old. And of course cannon ruter was always necessary. And of course you had to dry your home, you had to cover up, you gotta store lance or the equipment, or you use pipe, the ones with the knots on it. When you were a graduate or were a higher class you had a pipeless furnace in your house, not just a kitchen stove. So you use those big knotted things in the pipeless furnace to keep your house warm.

And did you have any animals to take care of in your family?

Well everybody seemed to have something. At least some chickens, geese, we had a cow. Several people had cows around. They just take them out in the field by chain, the chain maybe 25 to 30 feet most. Bring the cow into the barn and get its milk then of course...every body had gardens of course too.

Everybody grew a lot of their fruits and vegetables.

Right. We grew our own potatoes. We used to rent two or three acres and grow our own potatoes and pile up in the summer. And those potatoes would last us all year.

Um, how did you earn money? Earn spending money?

Well, actually there was not that much time. The only time you could earn spending money really is caddying on a golfing. It was always the boys in particular. From ten years old up they didn't want a Saturday, Sunday or holiday. They went caddying.

Every Saturday and Sunday?

Absolutely. And of course the golfing is closed around Labor Day. That was the end of the season. Every dollar went to your mother. The only thing you kept was the tips that you got, maybe a quarter or a dime or whatever it is. And of course, that was a big deal. We gallowed at the corner store, crawled down the village of Babylon and to the Candy Kitchen and ate big big banana splits.

You worked hard after caddying all day, carrying the clubs.

And we walked from the Corner Store to where Higbie Lane and Hawley....

Hardy boys. Where there any stills in West Islip where they made their own liquor during prohibition?

There was no law against making whiskey, as long as you didn't sell it. But, how could you make whiskey and not sell it to people who just didn't know how to make it? Hahaha.

So a drink was an important thing to celebrate?

Oh yes, drinking was very important. One of the greatest things I remember when I was a kid was the Ukrainian weddings, or Ukrainian christenings. They were a neighborhood affair really. And if you didn't get invited to a christening or to a wedding you were suspended or you didn't get along with that family. It wasn't a question. Everyone went to a wedding. And everyone went to a christening.

One big happy family.

That's right. And usually the weddings were during the summer time, during the holiday weekends like the Decoration Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day. Where the wedding were there would be dancing in the garage or the barn and have the tables under the apple trees or oak trees on the grass. And that was the wedding out there. And of course the music and orchestra was usually a three piece orchestra. Usually a group of people coming into the wedding party, just coming in, you know their guests, either through a door or through a gate, the orchestra would stop immediately and sing "Dadada Dadada Dadadada," and everyone would look and say who's that coming? That tune was a signal that somebody was coming. And of course, usually what they usually do is take out a purse and take out a dollar bill and hang it up so everyone can see that you are giving the orchestra players a tip. Because usually weddings were arranged that way, either you get paid outright or work on what you get at the gate, or half and half or both ways. That's the way weddings were arranged by finance. Musicians were paid that way.

No union. Hahaha. Can you tell me something about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on Montauk Highway?

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church on ...? No, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is on Higbie Lane. But the Ukrainian Catholic Church is on Montauk Highway.

I'm sorry. Ukrainian Catholic Church. Right.

Actually the church that's on Montauk Highway as the Ukrainian Catholic Church or at the time, Episcopalian was sold to the Ukrainian Catholics years ago. In the meantime, the church on Higbie Lane which is an Orthodox Church, that was one time a Ukrainian Catholic Church. Through back historical discussions, some of the Ukrainians decided that they were not Roman Catholics, that they were of Orthodox derivation or origination or whatever you want to call it...

Greek Orthodox.

Greek Orthodox. And because the Cussites they got their religion from Princess Alca, who got their religion from Constantinople who was at the time was the head of the church in Western Rome. It was Constantinople. It was Orthodox.

And the Church on Higbie Lane was St. Peter's and Paul's Church, and who built that?

The Ukrainians in the neighborhood. My father-in-law was one of the chief sponsors of it financially, a man by the name of Mr. Palencia and Mr. Podensty who was also another sponsor and several others that I just can't think of right now.

When was that built?

About 1923. Actually, it wasn't built. It was an icehouse that was dragged over from one of the estates from the village of Babylon and then put on a foundation and added onto. It was originally it was an icehouse on Gilmore's Estate.

Oh originally it was an icehouse on Gilmore's Estate.

That's right.

And now I understand it's a landmark designated by the historical landmark designated by the Town of Islip. Is that right?

That's right.

Today in our community the Long Island Railroad plays a very important part for commuting to the city etc. What are your memories of the LIRR back in the early 1900's.
Oh god. Well I can't remember 1900s.

Well, 1920s, 1930s.

There were steam engines. There were no oil locomotives or electricity. And when they came rolling by at 8:00 in the morning because there was an 8:05 that was an excuse to stop at Babylon and Jamaica was the next stop. And there was one at 10:30 and there was one at 11:15 and there was one at 4. It was one of the huge steam engines and you can hear them blowing their whistle 4 miles away. And sometimes on a day where there was low humidity or the air pressure or atmospheric pressure was low that smoke would cover the whole neighborhood. That black smoke would. And of course my mother was always wanted to cry when she her lungs were hung up and the smoke just you know ...

Were the trains always late in those days as they are today?

I've never heard of a train being late even with the snowfalls that they used to have. They had huge plows, one of the biggest special type of snow plows. These plows were maybe 20 feet high. There was no delaying anywheres or stopping anywheres or canceling anything because of snow.

Really. Haha. You really were uh...

Yeah, that's right. We lived by the whistle. Quarter to six in the morning we knew a certain train whistle so we knew it was quarter to six. Quarter to seven, seven after seven, I knew I had to be in school about five minutes after eight. The whistle train went by I knew it was time to go to school and by the time it whistles you know it's eight, eight-thirty you had to be in school, a quarter to nine. But these trains really were our time table, our clocks.

Oh, so you could set you clock by the whistles?

Absolutely. Absolutely. Ha, it's quite different today.

Mr. Zawyrucha, can you tell me, if you had your life to live over again, would you choose to live it in West Islip?

Well actually, to say anything else, I have nothing else to compare to. I was born in northern Jersey. I didn't like it there because the atmosphere was smoke and smelly. And we moved out here and I remember the first day we moved out here I saw the open fields, and the green grass, and the yellow sun bright day. I will never forget that day. I just remember that so distinctly how beautiful it was out here as compared to where I came from. I would never live in the city. I think West Islip has been a place for us...I've been around of course, I've seen other places. But sometimes the winter weather, especially getting old, it gets a little ...

But all in all...?

Yeah I would say. I don't think there's anybody who has any regrets.

Nice memories of growing up.

Yes of course.

Mr. Zawyrucha, thank you so much for this very interesting interview.

I hope that I helped.

Yes. Yes.

(March 3, 1982)