

RESIDENTS OF BRISTOL REMEMBER: AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Regina A. McIntyre

Bristol Borough Community Partnership



The Bristol Borough Oral History Fair was presented on Monday, June 2nd, 2008 at the *Bristol Riverside Theatre*, 120 Radcliffe Street, from 6:00 to 8:00 P.M. The venue presented well known denizens of Bristol Borough recounting their lifelong experiences in the Borough.

The Oral History Project had its inception during The [United Way of Bucks County's](#) full-day workshop presentation of "Bristol Borough Non-Profit Day" which was co-hosted by [Bristol Borough Community Partnership](#) (BBCP) June 7, 2007. The day's events ended with the announcement of a grant opportunity. The proposal centered on a community project that was required to involve at least two organizations and have a multi-generational component working together to achieve a specific goal.

The deadline for the proposal letter was July 9, 2007. **The grass didn't grow under the feet of Mary Jane Mannherz, Director of the [Grundy Library](#) and Loretta Vasso, Community Mobilizer of BBCP.** They were setting up meetings with local organization representatives to brainstorm a project and the **Bristol History & Culture Initiative** (BHCI) was conceived. Twenty-four organizations were initially involved and about 10 projects were on their wish list. The grant, provided by the United Way of Bucks County, was approved and the Oral History Project soon became the first project to be tackled by BHCI.

Dick Heyler, of the Athens Area School District, was contacted and he agreed to serve as consultant/trainer for the project. Dick had created an Oral History Project for the Bucks County Reading Council in March of 2004. He instructed the teachers and volunteers recruited by BBCP and Bristol Cultural & Historical Foundation on how to conduct the project and the curriculum that meetings the PA Department of Education standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. **Teachers who took on the project during the Middle School Activity Club period were: Gretchen Gardner, seventh grade Social Studies and Maria Doherty, seventh grade English of Bristol Borough Middle School.**

They worked many hours instructing the seventh grade students of Bristol Borough Middle School, in the art of interviewing. **Mary Gesualdi, Director of Financial Aid for Bristol Borough School District, provided coordination** and liaison assistance and Bristol History & Culture Initiative (BHCI) volunteers videotaped the interviews. **Students of Conwell-Egan High School Environmental And Spatial Technology (E.A.S.T.)**

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Program, recruited by Shawn Foley, a CEC Junior and resident of the Borough, produced the first draft of the video of the interviews. **Pam Duffy, an intern of Temple University, at PA State Representative John Galloway's office,** working with Loretta Vasso, Community Mobilizer with BBCP, coordinated many of the details in the opening days of the project.

A list of fifty potential interviewees was developed. The students selected the people that they would interview from the list, based on their interest in the interviewee's background. For the first presentation at the Bristol Riverside Theatre, fifteen of these Bristoleans articulated their stories.

George Molden, Jr., was the first historian on the video and he recounted his memory of Easter Egg Hunts conducted by the various churches in the Borough. His interviewers were Nick Crosby and Evan Weinberg. When asked how architecture had changed in Bristol, he responded that a lot of the old buildings had been torn down and noted other historic buildings in the area, such as the Jefferson School, "which is a fine building," King George II, and the Quaker Friends Meeting Hall.

Bonnie O'Boyle, began her story with the date of her birth, a really bold move for a woman. Her father, of O'Boyle's Ice Cream fame, had just returned from service in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II. Bonnie said that during the war, her father was about to board a landing craft, when a lieutenant called him aside to ask a question and caused him to miss that particular craft and take the next craft to embark, leaving him to live another day. The first landing craft was blown up. Her interviewers were, Danielle D'Ambrosio and Robyn Green.

Bonnie's reminiscences focused on her school days. "My father shipped me off to the nuns for high school. I had to write a lot of essays, three or four a night." She went on to say that the essays were written in long-hand with a fountain pen that she dipped in an ink-well in her desk. "All the exam questions had to be written in ink; if you ran out of ink in your pen, you had to quickly pull out the ink-well to refill."

She still remembers the house she was born in, on Monroe Street where she lived until she was five years old. The family moved to "what was then called 82 North Radcliffe Street." Bonnie recalled fun memories of a farm, across Radcliffe Street where pumpkins grew and where she would go to play, and her friend who had an old horse named Echo, whom she used to ride.

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William Pezza, author of “Annie’s Boys” stated that Bristol never had a racial issue. “It’s a pretty diverse and harmonious community.” Interviewers John Doyle and Mike Petrino were curious about the Vietnam Era and its impact in the Borough. “There are six or seven guys who died in that conflict. You can find their names around the flagpole at Lion’s Park. Just about every family was affected, because so many guys got drafted. There were draft dodgers who got in trouble; the draft office was burned, it wasn’t completely engulfed in flames, but there was an attempt to destroy the records. It was a pretty traumatic time.”

Deirdre French and Krista Mosco were the interviewers of Carl and Bonnie White. Carl remembered the factories that lined the Delaware, the Harriman Ship Center where they made ships during the First World War. “Kaiser bought it, they made planes for the Second World War; and then they made sinks and bathtubs.” He remembered that he and his friends swam from the Yacht Club to Burlington Island. Bonnie added that she wasn’t allowed to do that, “That was a boy thing”. She went on to say that the girls used to run home after school to watch American Bandstand. “There was a store on Rt. 13, Robert Hall, and my mother would take me there every year for my Easter outfit.” Bonnie said the style then was “crinolines”. “You’d wear two or three crinolines under your skirt. It was uncomfortable to sit in school because of the crinolines.” Carl said the fashion for guys was polyester bell-bottom pants. The White’s agreed that Bristol has gotten better, “the new traffic lights, the new housing”. Bonnie remarked that “A lot of people who left Bristol, want to come back, which is a good sign.”

Louise Davis told her interviewers, Reshia Jones and Jeleish Rivera, that she was born in Philadelphia, but lived most of her life in Bristol. She informed them that at one time, during a census, her mother was asked to name all the different nationalities that she was connected to. “In our background there was a diversity of ethnicities and when it [survey] came back, it said that I was white, because we had Irish, Indian, German and a lot of other nationalities in our history.” Louise, who is known throughout Lower Bucks County for her fine portrayal of Harriet Tubman, went on to explain that her mother’s maiden name was Ross and that her grandfather told the story of their kinship with the historic woman whose statue stands in Lion’s Park to commemorate her running the “underground railroad”. Harriet Ross Tubman was Louise’s grandfather’s first cousin.

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Louise also informed the students, "I belonged to the Juvenile Elks of Bristol." The Elks, at the end of Spruce Street sponsored activities and trips for the young folk. "We could do what we wanted to do. Bristol was a fairly safe place, so we could go outside, at least until it got dark. We would play in the street. There would be ball games and hide and seek. Behind my aunt's house there was a huge field with lots of buttercups and wild flowers; we would collect these scraggly flowers and take them home to our mothers."

Agnes Dick, who loves to dance, told about the Ragtime dances held in Bristol, where the kids from Burlington and Bristol would meet to dance. She had fond memories that she shared with Alyssa Anthony and Jailyn Bryant about the Grand Theatre. "I think we had our graduation exercises there. For ten cents you got the news, a serial, a cartoon, and a good, decent movie. You could probably buy a whole bag of groceries for ten or twenty dollars." Agnes grew sentimental over the WWII days when, "Everybody was together."

Eleanor Stevens, who is of Czechoslovakian decent, could speak no English until she entered first grade in Bristol. "We went to school at the High School until third grade and then went to Jefferson Avenue for fifth, sixth and seventh grades." She told Allyson Nocito and Heather Potts that Mill Street was a Shopping Mecca. "Friday nights, everyone would go to Mill Street. The bus going home would be packed."

Fidel Esposito, former Borough Manager, remembered his high school days and a teacher who facilitated a club that held field trips during his junior and senior years. "We had the opportunity to go to other cities and experience life outside of Bristol. Fidel stated that he was born at the Wagner Hospital, "which was located at Franklin and Radcliffe Streets, right across the street from the Galzerano Funeral Parlor." Daniel Raab and Zack Rivera were his interviewers and they asked about important historic people of Bristol. "Joseph Grundy. We have the Grundy Tower, the Grundy Library. A lot of important things that happened in the Borough while I was the manager for thirty-two years would never have happened if it were not for the Grundy Foundation. They always participated in whatever the Borough did to improve the Borough, to get rid of blight, to get rid of density, to clear out things. One of the major projects that the Grundy Foundation got involved in was the removal of the railroad tracks, which used to run through the center of town." Fidel reported that the railroad housed empty cars, "filled with chemicals" behind Bristol High School. The tracks were removed and made way for the Spur-line Park, "which you guys use to get back and forth to school".

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Kieran Greenfield and Fred Pirolo interviewed Helen Maurio who mentioned the two theatres in town during her youth, the Grand and the Bristol Theatre, now Bristol Riverside Theatre (BRT). “We walked; there were very few cars. Lincoln Avenue had everything you could want. We had a dry goods store, a candy store, a barber shop, a hardwood store, candy and ice-cream store combined; we had four grocery stores; that was all on one street. Mazzanti’s Grocery Store, which sells the best hoagies around, is still on Lincoln Avenue. In fact, Senator Grundy and his sisters used to shop Mazzanti’s Grocery Store.” Helen reported that there was no vandalism or crime that is currently in the Borough. “We just had a good time; everybody knew everybody. Now today, half of the people don’t even know their neighbors.”

Joe Cuttone, reported to Shane Adamson, Sean Coughlin and Matthew Legette, that he was born “the third of December, 1915; on my next birthday I’ll be ninety-three years old.” Joe said he was delivered by a mid-wife. “This lady had papers. A lot of mid-wives didn’t have papers.” The next question from the interviewers was, “What’s a mid-wife?” Joe explained, “A mid-wife is a woman that helps deliver a baby.” Joe is an excellent source of local history and has been taking photographs of the Borough since the mid-thirties; someone should publish his collection in a book. He went on to tell about the canal. “The original bridge was wobbly, so you had to be careful crossing the bridge. There weren’t many cars or trucks then. The canal brought coal down from upstate. Bristol had four places that sold coal. The first place was Jefferson Avenue; the next place was on Buckley Street.” Joe showed pictures of the canal and the bridges that served to deliver the coal. “Lock number three, went down eight feet to the next level; the coal barge would go into that lock, then they’d let the water go out, and the thing would go down. The canal was used, especially on Sunday afternoon, everybody would go swimming; it was nothing to have fifty, sixty people there.”

Christina Dunham and Emily Heller interviewed Marlene Siverstein, of Ballow Shoes. Marlene reported that her high school class won football and basketball championships. She said that the boys of her class went on to distinguish themselves in the armed forces during WWII; some of them rose to high ranks, including a Lieutenant Colonel. Marlene explained that there was no high school in Bristol Township at that time and students from the Township attended Bristol High. “Our class was one of the largest to graduate, over a couple hundred. Our graduations were held at the Grand Theatre.”

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Anthony Mandio talked to Kurri Hartzell and Codi Sue Scheidecker about the good old days of radio and big bands. Anthony said he graduated high school in 1942, when he was sixteen, "and when I was seventeen I was in the U.S. Army, World War II," where he served as a paratrooper. Anthony reported that he grew up in Harriman, and that "in the 'thirties' you could buy a house for seven hundred or eight hundred bucks, but nobody had that kind of money". Anthony remembered canoeing across the river to the island "with a young lady, who thought I was a great guy". Anthony told of hitch-hiking to Trenton with his friends, which must not have been an easy task, because "there were not many cars in those days." "I'll tell you what we did do in the wintertime; it seems we had more snow and ice then. This was in the 'thirties' and we'd hop on our sleds and grab onto the back of the car and hang on for a ride." Anthony continued with his youthful escapades, "On our major vacations, when we could get a car, we'd go to Seaside, but we'd usually have three or four flats before we got there." Anthony declared Bristol has improved since his day.

The Oral History Project was also completed at St. Ann School, where the 7th and 8th grade Social Studies teacher, Chris Gregor, worked with the students to produce similar presentations. Their projects were displayed at St. Ann's Open House on May 30th and their Oral History Fair will kick off the Fall semester.

Both Bristol Middle School and St. Ann School are slated to repeat the Oral History Project in the Fall, when contact will be made for interviews from the remaining list of names. **Additional subjects may be needed to be interviewed; anyone with a long history of living or working in Bristol Borough is invited to contact Loretta Vasso at BBCP, 215-781-6602 or lvasso@fsabc.org, if they are interested in being interviewed.**

Over the summer, the video will be edited and more interviews will be combined and pictures added to create a moving record of the Oral History Project. Putting the projects on archival paper, so that they can become a permanent part of the Grundy Library archives, will also begin. Oral History Fairs are planned for September, to showcase the St. Ann projects already completed and in November, for the final projects from both schools.

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In addition, **work will begin, spearheaded by Mayor Saxton, on phase 2 of the project.** This involves creating an audio version of the Walking Tour of Bristol, currently in print at Bristol Cultural & Historical Foundation, so that it can be converted to an audio format, uploaded onto the web, accessed as a podcast, or recorded for a bus tour on the Bristol RUSH Bus. The plan is to have MP3 players with the audio version of the Walking Tour that will be made available for borrowing from BCHF or the Grundy Library.

Finally, the dénouement, plans are also being made to incorporate the Oral History Project into the 7th grade curriculum.

All in all this has been an exciting and remarkable project, thanks to the funding from [United Way of Bucks County](#) and the efforts and hard work of many people in Bristol. **Please contact Loretta Vasso, Community Mobilizer at 215-781-6602 if you would like to join the project. Everyone from the community is invited to participate.**