

Gateway NRA, Sandy Hook
Oral History Interview with Eleanor Gould Henfey
Daughter of Western Union Marine Observer and Wife of a U.S. Coast Guard Surfman
1917 – 1954
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon, NPS
May 10, 1981
Transcribed by Jo Anne Carlson, 2008



Western Union tower and residence, left; Postal Telegraph residence and tower, center; Weather Bureau far right, c. 1920.



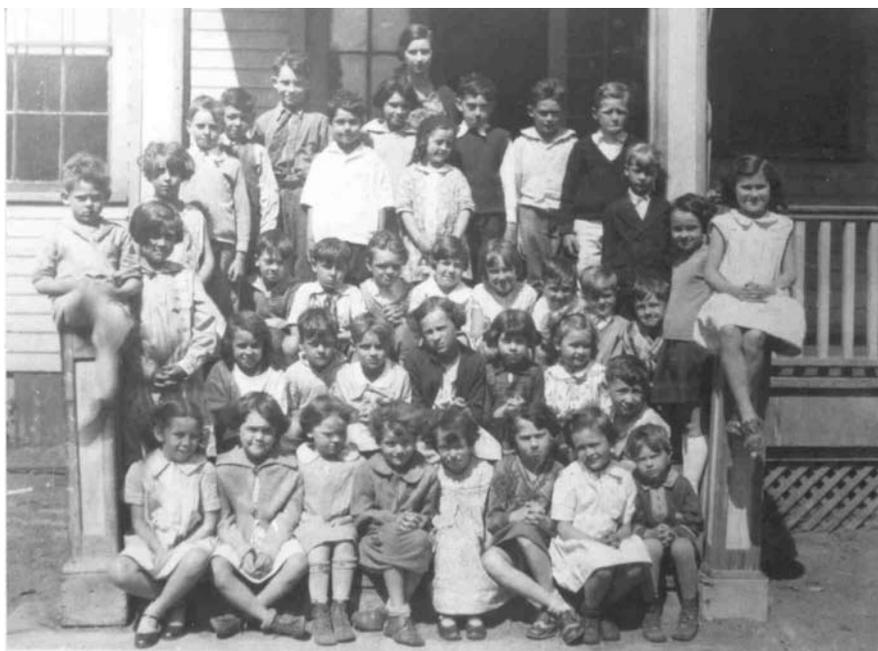
Close up view of Western Union Marine Observatory at Sandy Hook, c. 1920.
Three Marine Observers worked eight hour shifts 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Western Union Employee Duplex, c. 1920. The tower housed one of the three families of the Marine Observers. This residence housed the other two families.



Mr. Gould, using telescope to spot ships in New York Harbor.



1929 Fort Hancock School photograph.
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes are in parenthesis ()

Editorial note: The audio was poor and many parts of the interview were difficult to understand. The Marine Observers worked for Western Union and the Postal Telegraph Companies at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. The two companies maintained two towers and quarters for three families each. The observer's job was to report every ship entering New York Harbor. This information was used by the shipping companies, hotels, friends and relatives and other interested parties to know when the cargo or passenger ships would be docking in New York.

EH: Today I've invited to tape record for oral history archives Mrs. Eleanor Gould Henfey who was born on Sandy Hook in 1917 and who spent a total of thirty seven years here, quite a remarkable record. And one of our motives for tape recording her today is to hear the view point of a woman. Additionally she can provide some valuable information about cultural and sociologic aspects about living here and can present a picture of very important information regarding families, day to day problems and an overall view of what it must have been like to live here on Sandy Hook. Many of our tapes are lacking in this area and we have a unique experience today. Today is May 10, 1981 and we are presently in the Sandy Hook Museum. Mrs. Henfey has prepared an extensive assortment of notes and we'll start off using those notes.

EGH: My Father was transferred to Sandy Hook as a Marine Observer for Western Union in 1912. Previous to that he had worked at Fort Wardsworth on Staten Island, New York. The observatory tower was situated near what today is the water plant.

EH: Within the current Coast Guard boundary? The present Coast Guard boundary?

EGH: Well, no, at that time it was situated in back of the Post Engineers. (Near nine gun battery.) His family: a wife Eleanor, a daughter Margaret, and a son William. I can remember my Mother making a remark that every time she came out the door a sentry would say, "Halt, who goes there? Advance and be recognized." It frightened her. She was not familiar with Army regulations. James Jr. was born in 1913 and Thomas in 1915 and the quarters were moved to the point of the Hook in 1916 (What is now Coast Guard property) on a trailer pulled by horses. My Mother was pregnant with me during the move and I arrived on January 4, 1917 in the back bedroom of my Parent's home overlooking New York Harbor and Romer Shoals Light was signaling the entrance to New York Harbor. We enjoyed the beach every day in the summer. Everyone learned to doggie paddle at age 3. I went to Fort Hancock School at age five. (inaudible) was my first grade teacher. The school was comprised of two rooms. Pearl Murray was principal. We lived in a neighborhood of seven families, five or whom had children.

EH: The seven families were three Western Union, three Postal Telegraph, you mentioned before.

EGH: And one Weather Bureau family.

EH: And one Weather Bureau family. That's good to know.

EGH: They were the Dows.

EH: The Dows were the...

EGH: Weather Bureau. We organized our own play and games: kick the can, ring-a-levio, softball, touch football. I had one close girlfriend, Jessie O'Neill.

EH: Jessie O'Neill is still in Atlantic Highlands today.

EGH: She is still in Atlantic Highlands. Her Father was a Marine Observer for the Postal Telegraph tower which was adjacent to Western Union. We made doll houses. We went beach combing and picking up orange crates. We put one on top of the other and had four rooms. We picked up driftwood for furniture, small pieces. Round pieces would be tables. Short pieces would be chairs and tall pieces for a china closet. We would use our imagination with the natural resources we found on the beach. We'd put small pieces of material to make table cloths and bed spreads.

EH: Could you list the names of those families, by the way? The seven, you said the Dow's for the Weather Bureau, the O'Neill's was on of the Postal Telegraph.

EGH: As far back as I can remember, it was John White and his wife who lived in the quarters under the Western Union tower and we lived, at that time, in the next quarters to them which was a double house. And Mr. Zilly, Emil Zilly lived on the other side, lived there by himself. He had a home in Staten Island and his Wife would come down on weekends during the summer when their son wasn't in school and he would go home on

his days off to Staten Island. The next quarters were three. Mr. and Mrs. Bono lived there. He was a Telegraph Observer. In the middle were the O'Neills, John and Alice and the William Murrays. And the Weather Bureau was Milton Dow. He had three sons.

EH: It's excellent that you can name all of the seven.

EGH: Well, that's how I remember. Someone moved in and took over the Dow's.

EH: Sorry, I interrupted you, but I just wanted to actually record those family names.

EGH: Did you want to know how many children they each had.

EH: If you can remember, sure.

EGH: Like I said the Whites did not have children. The Goulds' had five. The O'Neill's had nine.

EH: Nine children in the O'Neill family.

EGH: And ours had three sons. (inaudible talking with noise in background) In the wintertime. I told you what we did in the summertime.

EH: Right. Yeah.

EGH: We played house on the driftwood on the beaches we also stole a potbelly stove to keep us warm. To keep us out of the way, also. (laughter) We played paper dolls. (inaudible) We made ours from, cut them out from mail order catalogs like Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Wards. Each room display would be living room, dining room, etc. The figures of the ladies in the beautiful gowns would be the mothers and we'd have the fathers and the children and that was our family of paper dolls. In the spring, we'd pick wild flowers from the fields. Star of Bethlehem, buttercups and daisies. We also picked our asparagus. We'd get up early in the morning and go out and get our bundle and bring them home and make cream and have it creamed on toast. I can remember my sister Peg I have to send her a steno (inaudible), stenography (inaudible) in 1925. When I was eight, my parents decided that I should take ballet lessons. (Inaudible) I was such a tomboy playing all this football and baseball with my Brothers. They thought best to make a lady out of me so I took ballet lessons for five years. My Father took me to Long Branch once a week. I was excused from school about an hour earlier, which I didn't mind and I took lessons from Madame Defonte in Long Branch. We had a YMCA organization that's putting on a program where they wanted talent. I had my first solo and my first tutu and I danced to the (inaudible). There was a boy who played the violin and he was going to play (inaudible) on the violin. So, I was told that I would have to improvise and make up my own steps and my own costume. So, I did a number to "In a Little Spanish Town." But it wasn't easy. I guess it was easier for me to do steps that it would have been for him to play notes. (laughter)

EH: You mentioned, by the way, that you knew of all of the three Fort Hancock schools, which I find fascinating. That you attended the original wooden structure school, that you went to the red brick long school (Building 102, and that your son attended the Ordnance Laboratory School (Building 109).

EGH: Right. I went to two of the schools.

EH: So you were familiar with all three of the early Fort Hancock schools which is quite exceptional.

EGH: Yes.

EH: And the old photographs you have in fact really show the school with the children there standing outside with Pearl Murray.

EGH: (inaudible)

EH: Great. So you went to ballet school and then what?

EGH: I danced in the local theaters and (inaudible) hotels in Asbury. I was always a shy person but didn't seem to mind dancing in front of an audience. I was fine once I was on, but I was kind of nervous before. In 1929, my Father rented a place in Red Bank. My Brothers graduated from high school and they couldn't commute from Sandy Hook to New York so we moved to Red Bank then. They went to work at the New York Stock Exchange. I entered Red Bank Junior High School at the time and graduated from there and moved to Riverside Heights in Middletown Township and went to Middletown Township High School. We always spent our weekends and vacations at Sandy Hook. My Father still worked there then. We used our quarters for summer vacations.

EH: So you kept contact here all the time.

EGH: Always kept contact, yes. Dad had a temporary transfer to Staten Island for eight months and we returned to Sandy Hook in the spring of 1934. My Mother passed away in the fall, and I was graduated the following year. (inaudible) We played cards, went to the beach swimming, played tennis, fished and just enjoyed everything. I miss it if you couldn't tell. I went to work in the PX (Post Exchange) here for six months.

EH: The Post Exchange (Building 53) was the building directly behind the YMCA Building 40 you are talking about. As to your memory, that's where it was then.

EGH: Right, that's where it was then. I worked as a part assistant, bookkeeper. I worked for (inaudible). She had a southern accent (inaudible) So, I acquired a southern accent. (laughter) I don't know how that happened. I had two children who went to college in North Carolina and they never picked up any accent.

EH: That's great.

EGH: It's strange how some people pick up an accent. My Brothers used to joke about it. After that I went to a Western Union School in Bloomfield, to Teletype Operator School. After graduating from there I went to work in the Western Union Office on 6th Avenue and 34th Street. That's where Macy's and Gimble's and Sak's was, which made for good shopping tours. During my lunch hour I think I spent my whole salary for a week. I lived at a YWCA on 12th Street and traveled by subway up to 34th Street. I still maintained, was in touch and came home on weekends. My Father was still here with Western Union. My Brothers (inaudible) and Jim shared an apartment on Staten Island but we all came home on weekends. I met Elmer Henfey, a surfman in the United States Coast Guard in 1937. It was love at first sight. We kept steady company on weekends for six months. I left my job in the city and we were married in St. Mary's Chapel on April 18, 1938. We lived with my Father for about four and a half years at the Western Union quarters.

EH: Do you know who married you at St. Mary's Chapel?

EGH: Yes, Father Stein. He was a Major in the United States Army. Chaplain.

EH: So, you lived with your Father those first for four years?

EGH: Four and a half years. When my first born son arrived in January 1941, when he was five months old we had an alert that many planes were reported to be approaching New York Harbor.

EH: That was 1941?

EGH: New York Harbor actually, which put them in Fort Hancock. All the women and children and hospital patients and civilians were to evacuate their dwellings and go to an improvised storage bunker which was probably Battery Potter. It was a very damp and smelly place.

EH: Which it still is. (laughter)

EGH: We were there for several hours. The MPs (military police) went to every quarters to see if everyone left for the shelter and I grabbed formula and diapers for the baby. Fortunately, it was a false alert. Civilian men were not permitted inside the shelter. My Father had to remain outside along with other civilian men. My Husband told me to stay put in my house. There would be another alert. He said it was ridiculous the way the cars were converging in one place. If it had been the enemy and it had been a real raid, a bomb would have hit Battery Potter first.

EH: The perfect target.

EGH: There must be something good going on in there with all those cars around. There were many transfers in the Coast Guard during the War. A Yeoman, Matt Beechem, was

transferred. We bought his bungalow across from the Coast Guard Station. We organized a Coast Guard Wives' Club. We held bingo games to buy layettes for newborns in the Coast Guard. We assisted the Red Cross by knitting navy blue scarves eighteen inches wide and twelve feet long. We endured a lot of scary blackouts during that time. In February 1945, our Commanding Officer, Lt. Commander Morin, passed away. I had I guess given birth to our second son at the time and could not attend his funeral. It was a military funeral by the Post Chaplain. Several of his men carried his casket from the Coast Guard Station to the Post Chapel. My Husband was a pallbearer. My Husband said he shed a tear at every step he took. Lt. Morin was a very good Commanding Officer and he thought the world of him. After the War the temporary Coast Guard barracks were converted into apartments for married enlisted men. Lt. Mister was Commanding Officer at the time. We were told that we had to give up our bungalows and that we were squatters. Living, owning our homes but not the land. I chose to move into the Lighthouse Quarters which was unoccupied at the time, instead of moving into apartments and we lived there for several years.

EH: What became of the bungalows?

EGH: They were moved. Some by barges, were taken off by barges and others by trailers. One was moved by a trailer. (inaudible) One is down in Sea Bright on the shore. The two story house was leveled. And we moved into the Lighthouse Quarters.

EH: What year was that? The Lighthouse Keepers Quarters.

EGH: I'd say 1949. (inaudible) There was surf fishing, frost fishing, and we always enjoyed the beach. My Husband would carry.... Our much wanted daughter Peg was born July 5, 1953. My whole family carried the bassinet and the beach umbrella and all the paraphernalia for a baby so we could go down on the beach. Shortly after my Daughter was born, my Husband requested a transfer to the Coast Guard in the Florida District. The request was granted. At the time, there were seventeen openings for Boatswains mates in Florida. So we were sent to Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. In 1956, he was assigned to Peanut Island which is located near West Palm Beach (Florida). He retired in October 1956 and we returned to Jersey and we settled as close to the shore as possible in Navesink.

EH: I had a few questions and that was, before when we were just talking casually you mentioned something about the Bakery and the Murray family. Recall that for us because that was really amazing.

EGH: In the lower grades in the Post School, during recess, we would go to the Post Bakery Shop.

EH: This was around the 1920's more or less?

EGH: Yes, and we would pick up bread for our parents. There were two loaves that were both together. And that's how we bought them. We were so hungry, that by recess

time we would tear the loaves apart and eat some of the warm bread inside. There was a hole in the bread by the time we got home. (laughter)

EH: It never got delivered as a whole loaf.

EGH: It came with a crust but the innards were gone.

EH: And how about the temper of the Baker?

EGH: Well, yes. Sometimes we would want a little, we would beg him to bake a little loaf for us and give us something to eat.

EH: And what would he do?

EGH: He gave us, if he wasn't in a good mood, he'd throw wet dough at us.

EH: The Murray family, how many children were there?

EGH: I think there were three.

EH: And do you know where are they now?

EGH: I knew Iris and I knew Dorothy. And there was a son also but I believe he was much younger. But I do know they had a son. Now, one of his daughters was here for our last reunion.

EH: That's right. Dorothy and she bought some photographs, also. I didn't meet her though. Also another question I had, do you recall the interior of the Western Union Telegraph tower itself?

EGH: The interior was all wainscoting as I remember it.

EH: What was the tower like? I mean, obviously it was very tall and what was inside? Endless staircases?

EGH: Staircases and I guess windows where you could look out, naturally going up. They had a communicating system. It was a tube. You'd blow on it downstairs and it would make a whistle upstairs at the top.

EH: What did that signal mean, though?

EGH: If someone wanted to communicate without climbing all the way up the stairs and you wanted to get in touch with someone on the top floor. The children used it quite a bit. We'd blow in and of course, my Father would answer. It was one piece that you'd put to your ear and to your mouth. When we were children we used to like to climb up the fire escapes to see how far we could go. I think about the fourth floor.

EH: Was the tower about as tall as the Lighthouse is now? Do you recall? Because the Lighthouse was about 105 feet.

EGH: Eight stories. I'm not too sure.

EH: Eight stories, really? And it was all a wooden structure. And what color was it painted? Probably a white tower.

EGH: On the outside? It was yellow I think.

EH: And what was the equipment like when you finally got to the Marine Observers?

EGH: To the top? A telegraph key that big and telescopes. And you could look out the portholes (inaudible) to observe the ships in. (inaudible) by their shapes and sizes.

EH: So you became very familiar with the passing boats. And your Father, was he in command? Was he the Chief Observer?

EGH: Not when he first came. Mr. Zilly was the Senior.

EH: And your Father eventually became Manager?

EGH: After many, many years he became Manager. And he worked nights for many, many years. In order for them to get a day off, they had to work two shifts. They worked seven days a week full-time. It wasn't easy to keep five children quiet. My Father had to sleep during the daytime. It was a very difficult job for these men because they only had three to work the whole shift.

EH: Right. Another question I had is can you recall the interior of the quarters of the Western Union Telegraph Operator's Quarters? What was that like?

EGH: Well, if I say wainscoting, the quarters underneath the tower, I think the first two stories was quarters and they were all done in wainscoting. Ours, the duplex part, was plaster and lathe and painted a horrible straw color, buff or straw. The paint at the time was on all of the quarters. (inaudible) We had metal ceilings.

EH: We are recalling thirty seven years as the child of a Western Union Marine Observer's family and also later marrying a Coast Guard Surfman. We should add he was one of the last surfman. Elmer Henfey was the last surfman stationed here at Sandy Hook which was quite a distinctive and special honor of saying that he had been. Continuing with children we were talking about the distinction of girls and boys and your upbringing.

EGH: Yes well we were so few of us we had to make our own play and entertainment and (inaudible) We played with them. (laughter)

EH: But it was more rounded, you know.

EGH: It was. It was a healthy life, a very healthy life. I never missed a day of school in seven years. My Mother always had a great answer when it was raining. She told me to, "Walk in between the rain drops." So I always went to school. And if we had a big snowstorm, sometimes with drifts of eight feet high sometimes across the engineers there, we had to walk to school. She told me to follow my Brother and he was only two inches taller than me. (laughter) So he would have to dig his way through these big drifts but we got to school.

EH: How marvelous.

EGH: (inaudible) I think it was from all the healthy outdoors. Swimming, exercising that we survived all the cold winters. It built us up for the winter.

EH: Do you recall any major storms: hurricanes, blizzards, really major storms?

EGH: A lot of hurricanes here. Ships came in. I guess it was during the Cold War years. I can remember my Father saying the inexperienced seamen they weren't used to these waters.

EH: Actual ship wrecks...

EGH: We had a Liberty Ship come in right on the beach. We had a terrible hurricane and my Husband was at the Weather Bureau during the storm and I was alone with my youngster for the first time. There was such a wind that day that the furnace went out. It was a terrible hurricane. Water all up in front of our bungalow, flooding. I couldn't go for help. I didn't know where to turn. My Husband wasn't here. Next thing I knew I had to build a fire. So I learned to do a lot of things.

EH: Wow, and you can testify to the fierceness of the weather here, which you have to live here to appreciate.

EGH: Right. Bitter cold. The winters are cold. A lot of people said, "How could you enjoy living out here for such a long time?" But the summers, I guess, made up for it, springs were pretty. Winters were rough. The wind blows right across the peninsula.

EH: But did you actually feel isolated? You know like you were at the end of nowhere?

EGH: The only time I felt that way was when we were in the bungalow. It was very small and I had two children at the time. The rooms were very small and I never went out very much. My Husband used to go to the movies a couple of times a week but I didn't feel as though I wanted to go while he would baby sat. There were mostly

servicemen there. I didn't want to go and sit in a theater full of servicemen. It was lonely. I guess the other women felt the same way. They were very long and cold nights and I can remember on the Stromberg-Carlson phonograph changing (inaudible) and I learned to love music. I listened to music to drown out the sound of the wind that had gotten through the windows.

EH: Which leads me to probably the last question, and that is what was the role of women here, as a child, as a mother, from your experiences being in the family of your Mother and then later on having your own children here? What was the approach of women?

EGH: I think it was just to be a wife and a mother.

EH: Right. A traditional role.

EGH: To deal with your mate. We put up with a lot to be here.

EH: A lot of sacrifice.

EGH: We had to travel several miles to get to stores. When my Mother, when I was a child, they had to go by train and then get a trolley car and go into Red Bank.

EH: It was a major pilgrimage.

EGH: It was quite an improvement when I started raising my family. I had a car and I would drive.

EH: Which was quite unusual. How many women did drive a car? Was that considered...

EGH: In my, when I grew up most women did drive, but never in my Mother's. My Father just learned to drive.

EH: Not in your Mother's generation ever. She was considered....

EGH: No, but we all learned to drive being that it was a place with no traffic we could drive and learn to drive.

EH: You mentioned women organizing different, sort of, fund raising and charitable things like knitting scarves during the War. What were the other things that you can just rattle them off, having fundraising.

EGH: As I said we had bingo games and things like that. (inaudible) They didn't make very much money. Nobody could say you couldn't get married and have wives and have

children and they were strapped for money. So these layettes, they would come in handy. We just did whatever we could, beside knitting our husbands warm sweaters.

EH: You had no Commissary privileges, by the way?

EGH: Oh yes.

EH: You did. Was there a Commissary here?

EGH: Yes. When I was a child, our parents would write down what they wanted we would go down, as children and hand it to Sergeant Cohen. He was like a clerk in the Commissary. He would write on his pad everything our parents had written. He would transcribe over to his pad. We would take this slip into the storekeeper and he'd fill the order.

EH: That is the Commissary still standing there, Building 47.

EGH: Right. Then of course, we had the PX for lunch or dinner and a Butcher shop.

EH: Oh really, within the PX.

EGH: This was when I grew up. This was during my Mother and Father's time.

EH: Wasn't the Post Exchange mostly for like small items like cigarettes and cosmetics, gifts?

EGH: Yes. As you go in there were two parts. The place where you would go and buy the gifts, cigarettes and things like that, sundries.

EH A store

EGH: Right. And men's clothing, men's shirts, service shirts.

EH: Uniforms.

EGH: Uniform shirts and shoes, they used to sell shoes. On the right side of the room was the Butcher Shop and where you bought your groceries. Downstairs they had a concession where they served luncheons and ice cream.

EH: Like a soda fountain type....

EGH: Right.

EH: And then the Bowling Alley was put in there later. Do you remember anything about that?

EGH: No. I don't remember a bowling alley in there, but there was a bowling alley as a child right across here downstairs. That changed while I was living in the Lighthouse Quarters. That was a Gymnasium. (Building 70 was a gym and then in WWII the PX)

EH: Right behind the Museum.

EGH: That was a Gymnasium and they had a Bowling Alley downstairs. And before I left they made a PX out of it where you could have lunch and ice cream. (inaudible) And then we used to go to Fort Monmouth and shop at the Commissary.

EH: Do you remember anything about the laundry in Building 77?

EGH: That would be Army and my Father was not..

EH: Right as a civilian he wouldn't...

EGH: Post Tailor Shop, the Duze's home.

EH: Bernie Duze. Oh, right, the Duze family. Duze was Post Tailor. Where was that shop?

EGH: That was across from the Barracks.

EH: That's what we call the Laundry. That was Building 77.

EGH: We had our laundry done on Staten Island. That was Mojack Laundry. It was \$5 a week we used to stuff that bag. (laundry)

EH: Unlimited laundry...

EGH: Unlimited laundry for \$5 a week. Shirts would come back all ironed and with cardboard.

EH: And starched.

EGH: It was unbelievable for \$5 a week.

EH: He would pick up and deliver here?

EGH: Yes. To the (inaudible)

EH: How about shoe repair? Was there a cobbler?

EGH: Oh yes. He was very nice.

EH: Where was he positioned?

EGH: He was underneath the PX too.

EH: In the basement of the PX, hmmm. And did people gardening? Did they do things, you know, in the summer did they have gardens near their houses or community gardens?

EGH: My Mother had a big garden out in back of our house when I was a child. And they used to use the frost fish that the boys got in the winter time. We used that for fertilizer.

EH: That's excellent. Yeah.

EGH: When we came home from school, we were given a section to cultivate and that was down by the stables. (inaudible) It was wonderful to have a garden of our own. It was all sectioned off to anyone that was interested in.

EH: You said that Pearl Murray was the principal.

EGH: Oh yes.

EH: Actually how many classes, how many grades did the Fort Hancock school handle?

EGH: Well, as I remember, (inaudible) when my sister attended school there was a soldier teaching. He was smoking cigars or cigarettes or something and he threw it in a waste paper basket and there was a fire in the school so I think they decided it was better to get women teachers. I can remember that my Father was on his way over. (inaudible) My Father at the time was seeing about getting a teacher brought to Sandy Hook School. He was responding to a call. There was an accident in Old Bridge. (inaudible) and he was thrown out of the car there was an accident on the bridge – the old bridge - he was thrown out of the car and hit the railing and broke his nose. He was taken to the Doctor Offerman and Dr. Offerman shoved tubes up his nose.

EH: Worse than the accident.

EGH: He was a rough doctor. He was our Coast Guard doctor. He delivered me and delivered my Brother.

EH: Offerman?

EGH: Offerman. Offerman from Highlands. He was the Coast Guard doctor too. He didn't believe in any sedatives or....

EH: Anesthesia. (laughter) Did he live here?

EGH: No he lived in Highlands. He lived over the (inaudible) drug store. He had his home there. He married a Parker which you probably heard of. They called it

Parkertown. He used to come in on, I think I heard him say a horse and buggy when my brother was born.

EH: He probably did.

EGH: I think my Brother Jim was delivered by an Army doctor because we were further down on the Post. We didn't go to a Coast Guard Hospital went to a Marine Hospital.

EH: Could you have used the Post Hospital?

EGH: They said no.

EH: Oh, that's too bad.

EGH: We did later. (inaudible) My son was very sick. He was born an asthmatic and he got whooping cough. He had the injections. They were wonderful they came over and took care of him and they brought intravenous feedings over. They brought him food. Asthma and whooping cough together is very serious.

EH: Very dangerous.

EGH: And the Chaplain anointed him. He said they saved his life because he knew what it was.

End of Interview