

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Interview with  
Violet Murray Masciale, Sandy Hook School Teacher  
Also with Manny Masciale, widower of Pearl Murray Masciale  
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon and Tom Hoffman, NPS  
August 30, 1986  
Transcribed by Jo Anne Carlson 2007



The Fort Hancock Public School was located in Building 109 in 1939.  
Photo courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )  
(Audio on the interview is difficult to understand.)

(Beginning of sentence is cut off)...Tom Hoffman and Museum Technician, Elaine Harmon are sitting in the house of Manny Masciale at Lighthouse Road, Highlands, New Jersey with his sister-in-law Violet Murray. Today is August 30, 1986 and we are about to tape record the memories of Violet Murray.

TH: We can start out by swimming at the end of the Hook. Wasn't that a little treacherous out there?

VM: (inaudible) We enjoyed it. We didn't seem to mind it in all kinds of weather.

TH: Were you visiting out there?

VM: Well, my uncle lived out there. My uncle and my aunt and their eight children.

TH: And this is William Murray?

VM: Right.

TH: He was with the telegrapher and marine observer at Sandy Hook. Was he with Postal Telegraph?

VM: No. He was with the...

MM: Your uncle was with Postal, wasn't he?

VM: No, my father was with the Postal. My uncle was with Western Union.

TH: Western Union, wow, competing firms here.

VM: Yeah.

TH: Those were those old towers like they used to have here, (in Highlands) they were down at Sandy Hook.

VM: That's right.

TH: Did you ever get into them and look around?

VM: Yes. Yes. We used to go up and down the stairs while there and look all around you know, and call down to the people down below.

EH: About how old were you then at that time?

VM: Well, I was in grammar school then. Of course, I didn't go over there then, after that. I was in college for four years. Then, when I came out of college I didn't get work right away as a teacher, so I substituted. Then, of course, I was over there just about, well, the teacher had scarlet fever, the one teacher, so I took her place. I substituted for her.

EH: Do you recall which teacher that was? Was that Helen Z.?

VM: No. I can't recall her name. I asked my brother-in-law if he remembered.

EH: Miss Conover, there was a Miss Conover?

VM: She was there with my sister.

EH: With Pearl?

VM: Yeah. She was there.

TH: Was this, which school was this? Was this the little wooden schoolhouse that was out there?

VM: The little one, (Building 109 which is located within the Coast Guard fence) and the Chapel was right behind it.

TH: Right. Which is still St. Mary's.

VM: St. Mary's Chapel.

TH: St. Mary's Chapel which is still there. The building is still there.

VM: I think the school building has deteriorated quite a bit, hasn't it? The last time that my brother-in-law drove me over there, just recently ...

TH: The building that was last used as a school is all boarded up.

VM: It looked terrible.

TH: I think it has been boarded up long even before the Army left Sandy Hook. That's one of the things we've been trying to find out is when the school was last in operation out there?

MM: It went (inaudible) operation in '51. And then they opened it up again just for a little while until Pearl Murray retired in '59. She went down there for one month, September '59 and right after that she retired.

EH: Oh really.

MM: They had to go out there and set it up again in '59. I don't know what happened after that.

EH: Hmm, that's interesting.

VM: It's not used now, of course, is it? Is it still all boarded up?

TH: Boarded up. I mean, I've been here since '74 and the building was in pretty decrepit condition when I first arrived there. It was all boarded up and you see, not used for a long time. The thing of it is though, in 1951, that was your wife?

VM: You could see by how it looked.

MM: She had transferred over from Middletown Township. She come under Middletown Township, you know?

TH: Right.

MM: Then they closed the school ...

TH: Out at Fort Hancock?

MM: Fort Hancock. And she wound up coming out of...and then an opening came up and she became, she was a principal teacher in Navesink. She took over in Navesink and then she retired in '59.

TH: She got this call.....

MM: She got the call in September before she retired, to go out there and set it up or do something. Then that's all I know about what happened. The classroom had about three or four rooms, or something like that. Maybe not rooms, but classes, maybe something like that. I don't know.

VM: There were two rooms, remember? The little ones were in one room and the older children were in the other.

MM: When was this?

VM: When Pearl was there.

MM: There was one time she had six rooms too, four rooms, in fact six grades. You know when you go out to the Hook before you come to the school that big building on the right, all brick?

EH: Yes, that's 102.

TH: The red brick building. Yes.

MM: That's where she was before, she was before she went to this other building that you're talking about. Now, when she was in that building....

EH: 102.

MM: They even had the Lionel trains upstairs for the kids and things like that. She had six or eight grades. It was quite active then.

TH: A lot of children.

MM: That's what I mean.

VM: In those days ....

TH: Yeah. We can talk again about that story about the dog? How does that go again? Start the story again.

VM: Oh, the dog started to follow the boy to school and finally he would come in. One day he came in up the steps and in the door and, you know, they had trained that dog to put his paw up when they saluted the flag. Did you ever hear of anything like that?

TH: No. You see it in the movies. They trained the dog to salute the flag.

EH: No kidding,

TH: I've seen it done in the movies. But the dog also used to come in and lay right there...

VM: ... at the side of his desk

TH: And this is Richard Dow?

VM: Richard Dow. His father was the head man at the Weather Bureau.

TH: I met him a long time ago.

VM: Richard?

TH: Yes. He came to Sandy Hook back in either 1975 or 1976 with his mother. At that time she was up in her 80's like 86, 87. He brought her there and they just came into the Museum. He's still around. He lives up in Morris County. He became vice president for the Prudential Insurance Company. When I met him, which is almost 10 years now ago or more, I think he was retired.

VM: He had a brother, Harold.

TH: Maybe that's the one. I met one of the Dow's.

VM: Well, that was Harold worked for The Prudential.

TH: Okay, it was Harold then. That's who I met, it was Harold.

VM: I don't know if Richard is, I hear he was in a serious accident. I don't think he is living.

TH: Well, Harold has been to Sandy Hook twice. I met him when I was first was there and then not too long ago, just maybe a couple of years ago, he came in again.

EH: Hmmm, no kidding. Well, there are a lot of civilians connected to Sandy Hook. I mean off the top of your head, do you remember the O'Neill's, the Dow's the Gould's...

MM: Simpsons?

EH: Simpsons, right.

VM: Simpson's are still living. Oh, the Simpsons had a big family. I think there was eleven children there.

TH: There was a large number. They lived right near here too near the tip of the Hook for a long time.

VM: Some of them are still living of course and some of the O'Neills.

EH: Simpson tribe, right.

TH: Tell us about some of your adventures in substitute teaching here.

VM: Well, I enjoyed it. It was so interesting because the children came from all different parts of the country, you know. And the father would be stationed in the Army and be transferred to Fort Hancock. I liked that to hear their experiences in other places where they lived. Some even from Europe.

TH: Yeah. They had to go all around the world. Were their officers' children in there as well as enlisted mens' children in there?

VM: Right and Coast Guard.

TH: Coast Guard, also. So, there was a mix of children from....

VM: That's right and that was fascinating, from all different branches of the service. They all got along very well. There was never any fusses of any kind. All lovely children. Oh, it was a pleasure to really teach them.

EH: About how big of a class would you estimate?

VM: Well, I would say in the lower grades, there must have been about 50 or so. And in the upper grades there might have been a few more, maybe about 75.

TH: Which grades are we talking about?

VM: Well, they went about as far as the sixth grade. One teacher had the younger children and my sister had all the older children in the same classroom. They only had two rooms at the time.

MM: ....fourth, fifth, and sixth

TH: In one room.

MM: Yeah that's right.

VM: My sister had fourth, fifth, and sixth and the younger ones the other teacher had. Only the two teachers.

MM: (inaudible) Peggy Conover.

VM: At first when Pearl went over there, there were only two Marion Emory, remember them?

EH: Maybe you were substituting for Miss Emory, do you think?

VM: No. No. She had gone. She had left. We were trying to think of the teacher I substituted for. I can't remember her name. She was a young teacher and she developed scarletina. It wasn't the regular scarlet fever, it was a milder case of scarlet fever. It was quite awhile before she came back. I was over there, I guess, about four or five months.

TH: Back then, having something like scarlet fever was deadly, right? Not like today.

VM: Yeah.

TH: Not like today where you can treat it better.

VM: That's right. It was quite a serious disease.

TH: Another thing, back then too wasn't diphtheria still dangerous.

VM: Right.

TH: They were killers of children, diseases back then that you had. Before I forget, were the older children upstairs or downstairs? Like the fourth, fifth, sixth grade would they be up? We're talking about the old two-room schoolhouse.

VM: It was all on one level.

TH: The two rooms?

VM: Yes, the two rooms.

EH: The higher grade was in one room then there was a center staircase?

VM: A hallway.

EH: And the other room was for the lower grades. Did you have a real slate blackboard?

VM: Yes, we had a blackboard.

EH: Really. And wooden desks? Like with the inkwells?

VM: Wooden desks with the inkwell.

TH: Was it the same back then, kids carving the initials in the desks?

VM: No they never did that. They were really very careful children.

TH: Really?

VM: Yes they were.

EH: No pigtails in the inkwells?

VM: No. (laughter)

TH: Wait a minute, these kids are too good to be true. (laughter)

VM: They did that in the Highlands Grammar School where I went to school. They used to do that with the pig tails in the inkwells.

EH: They were wild indians in Highlands? What would be punishment for children in school that misbehaved? Did you sit them in the corner, type of thing?

VM: You mean over at the Hook?

EH: Yeah.

VM: We very seldom had anything like that, any punishment. They were trained in the Army. I guess Army rules and all that they had at that time. You know, they were pretty strict, I guess.

MM: Anybody that was out of order like that they would tell their parents.

EH: Really?

TH: They were more regimented then, right down to the children.

VM: Yes. Very much so. You could see that in the attitude of the children.

EH: Really.

VM: Living on an Army Post, you know, and all, it made a difference, I think. Rather than when I went to grammar school, there was no regimentation like that.

TH: Back then, too, the children walked to school, right?

VM: Right.

TH: And that would be from all over the Hook, too, I guess?

VM: Sergeants' Row and Officers' Row, they came from, and the Coast Guard and the Lighthouse. My sister had the two children from the Lighthouse, the Burkhardts.

EH: Florence Burkhardt. Yes. Isn't that great. Her dad was Lighthouse Keeper in the 30's. Henry Burkhardt was her Dad, right. And who was the Assistant (Light Keeper) at that time, I trying to recall.... She did tell me and I have it in my notes. But John Mulhern walked from the Pumping Station on Horseshoe Cove, he walked to school. That's a good hike.

TH: And if it snowed, it snowed. You still had school.

VM: Right. (laughter) They had a fire over there where I was substituting. You know, over there where all the holly trees used to be, the forested area. There was really quite a oh, it was really a bad fire. We were riding home from school at the time when it was at its worst. And I got poison ivy. There was so much poison ivy over there.

TH: From the smoke blowing?

VM: Oh, yes. My face was all swollen up, both sides of my face. Oh, I was a mess. When I came home my mother looked at me and she said, "Oh what happened to you? I hardly know you."

EH: Was it in the spring time? Or do you recall what part of the year it was?

VM: The fire? Well, I'd say it was around near spring time. It was really a bad one. The smoke was tremendous and the blaze, oh my, gave the fireman a busy time trying to put that out because it covered such a big area.

TH: Sure yeah. It's a lot woods.

VM: It was all woods down that way. There were very few buildings.

TH: So the smoke was blowing up towards the Fort area where everybody was.

VM: Sometimes we would go into school on the train in the morning and we'd come back in the afternoon on an Army bus. And of course, the windows were open before we got to where the fire was. Then after a while they closed them but at first they had to keep them open and, oh my, I remember the smoke was blowing right in the bus. It was very serious. My face, I remember can that, my mother had to put some kind of lotion on it. She took me to the doctor.

EH: John Mulhern talked about caren (spelling?) oil. There was a remedy called caren oil for sunburn. Did they use any remedies for you on poison ivy?

MM: That Army soap. That brown soap.

VM: They used to make a lather of that. But the doctor said it really was a bad case of poison ivy.

EH: How long were you out of commission?

VM: Well, it was about three weeks before I went back and the teacher was still out of course. That was quite a long stretch there.

EH: So then who would substitute for you and her?

VM: I really don't...It was a young girl who was just out of teachers college. And I can't recall her name either. I should have written them down in a book and kept track of it that way. I'm eighty years old now and believe me, I'm getting forgetful.

TH: No, you remember.

EH: I'm forgetful. (laughter)

TH: I'm forgetful. I'm bad. Do you remember the train ride what that was like?

VM: Kind of bumpy.

TH: Along the tracks, the Army cars?

VM: Bumpy and awfully close in there I can remember, you know. It was shut up in the night, of course, and when you left early in the morning and my goodness, it was quite a ride. The bus, that was bumpy too. That was another bumpy trip.

EH: Where did you board the train?

VM: Right over here by Highland Beach.

TH: Highland Beach. Yeah.

EH: Water Witch?

TH: No. Highland Beach was right where the overpass is now. They had a railroad station there.

MM: The trains used to come down. The Jersey Central train used to go down there. There was a spur there or whatever it was, to go out to the Hook for whatever came in, freight.

TH: Off too the side.

MM: The side and if they had to pick it up, they'd pick it up.

TH: How about up at Fort Hancock? Where could you catch the train up there? Was it near the school?

VM: Well, we used to come back in the bus, come home in the bus but we used to go to school in the train.

EH: Where did it drop you off?

VM: They didn't run the train later in the afternoon.

TH: I see.

VM: So that's why we came home by bus.

MM: Where did they drop you off ? By the school?

VM: Well, pretty close to it.

MM: The last school it was at, the roundhouse was right across the street.

TH: Yeah the foundation is still there, right across the street.

MM: Right across the street.

EH: You have a good memory. Did you yourself, Manny, go out to Sandy Hook pretty often?

MM: I used to go quite a bit. Since 1932, I had a pass signed by the general.

EH: Really?

MM: There as a general there. And when I came back, we took a trip in '36, Pearl Murray and I up to Canada and went one way tracks and then we came back to Luce's Point (spelling?) and they stopped me at Lucas Point (?) and they said, "Where were you born?" And I said, "Jersey." "I'm going to hold you back." They said, "You got anything else?" I said, "Yeah," I was laid off from the railroad and I drove a taxi cab. I said, "Oh I got a taxi cab license." You got to be a citizen and all at the time to drive a

taxi in New York and they held me back. They wouldn't see my driver's license and I don't see why? No good. So, I had to take this piece of paper out.

EH: The Pass.

MM: They looked at it and it was signed by the general. They looked at it and they said, "Okay, you can go".

EH: (laughter) Did it say visitor's pass to Fort Hancock on it?

MM: Yes, that's what it was.

EH: My goodness.

MM: It was on a paper there that he signed. I was able to go in and out anytime. I went back out there even during the War. There were two fellas that worked with me on the railroad. I was back working on the railroad then and they both worked with me. One of them was from Camp E and the other was from Camp A, something like that. So, I went to see one of them and one of them was Frank Ryan and the other was Mike Doss. He was the one that I wanted to get a hold to come to the Hook but he worked on the engines too.

EH: Oh my.

MM: But I forgot the name.

TH: Jim Pike?

MM: No another one. Buchanan.

TH: Buchanan. Tommy Buchanan.

MM: Yeah. that's who it was.

EH: And his name is Frank Doss?

MM: Mike Doss was one of them who came out. He worked on the engines. You know, being he was a railroad man he would help me out once in awhile. I went to see Mike last year, I went to see Mike. I said do you know Frank Ryan? He said why. They both worked in the same department on the railroad. So we went to Camp E or whatever, and signed Frank Ryan up. Then we used to see each other. Outside of that they didn't know where the other was. They were living in different tents. They said I could go out there. It was during war time.

EH: That's unusual.

MM: I guess it was. After the War was done, then they made it tough.

TH: After the war?

MM: After the war. It was funny how they made it tough after the war.

TH: Was Pearl still teaching out there during the War?

MM: Oh yes, till after '51. She could have went into the Army if she to. And they wanted her. She could have been what do you call the WACs? (Women's Army Corps) WACs, they wanted to make her head of the whole thing. She knew Chaplain Arnold. It's on a piece of paper there. He was the chaplain for the school too.

EH: That's right. John Mulhern told me it was called the school's chaplain.

MM: He went on to become chaplain of the whole United States Army.

TH: Yeah.

EH: Through his influence he would have saw to it that she be...

MM: All of the ones that were there, the generals and all that, they knew of all of her qualifications and they wanted her to go into it. But she wouldn't do it.

EH: She was a very dedicated as a school teacher.

MM: Schoolteacher and being at home. That was the whole trouble for that too. And she had offers for jobs in New York. John Rooney said they were paying good money in New York City. She wanted to be home more than anything. But she could have had jobs with good pay. She was a college graduate too.

EH: Yes. That's considered a big credential.

MM: Yeah, if you went to college in them days.

EH: How about Violet, where did you graduate?

VM: Syracuse University.

MM: My brother still has her name on the boat he has for running.

EH: For running?

MM: In Boston College. Cause my nephew was a priest. He's a priest now. (inaudible) He kind of didn't believe it so he went and looked at it and there was her name.

EH: But Pearl, (she means Violet) you actually later had a career as a librarian, is that right? I didn't know that until later when I saw her picture in the newspaper.

VM: Public library. Then I was school library, high school library.

EH: I sent it a few weeks ago. It was a picture of you and it said you were celebrating .....

MM: I just gave it to her.

EH: Oh okay. It says here Highlands Library where she was librarian for 60 years...

VM: Part-time.

EH:... was honored on the new facilities first anniversary. I saw this in the newspaper, "The Courier."

VM: I used to do that as extra work because at first they couldn't get anybody to take charge of the library and then I took it over, but I took my library work at Trenton State (College). But I graduated in the College of Liberal Arts from Syracuse. I was a Language Major with a minor in Education.

EH: Really?

VM: Then I worked in the county gas company for awhile for two years. I did all the, I did some billing. I used to run the billing machine. And then after that I was there two years and then after that I got a chance to get a job down in Atlantic Highlands. The superintendent of schools came up to the county gas company where I worked to interview me. And he said, "Would you like a job? Our Librarian is eighty some years old and she retired." And he said, "We want somebody younger to take her place."

MM: She wasn't too anxious at that time.

VM: No. I hated to leave the gas company. I liked it there.

EH: When I first saw this, I saw your face Manny and I said that must be, you know, another....

MM: Pearl started that. She was one of a few women that started that library.

EH: The Highlands Library?

MM: For free, no wages. They started it at the Mayor's house. Then Violet got old enough she filled in.

VM: That's how I really started to work over there in the Highlands Public Library. But I was in the school library for the entire school from the first grade on up to high school, senior in the high school.

MM: That was in Atlantic Highlands.

VM: In Atlantic Highlands. And I taught two classes of English, Freshman English besides. And then I was the librarian for the whole town in Atlantic Highlands for everybody. They used to come to the school to get their books. It was down in the basement of the school, a huge room. Then....

MM: They started to cut down on the...they wanted more room for the school children. They took the library and made two school rooms and they gave her a small room upstairs, a cubby hole.

TH: I was gonna say, they stuck you upstairs.

VM: They stuck me upstairs. I was eleven years there and I heard there was a vacancy over in Bayview School in Belford on Leonardville Road. The teacher was going to have a baby so would I be interested. So, I said, "Yes," because I got tired of the small little space. It used to be a health room, very small. You could hardly move around and you couldn't get too many books in there. When the children would come for a study hall there would be too many of them and some would have to leave and go to another room and oh it was...

MM: They had a beautiful library downstairs, when they had it.

VM: So, I decided I would like to give that up. Then I went over to Bayview School and I taught first grade there. That's where I retired from.

MM: She had to take her courses all over again.

VM: I had a high school certificate, a secondary certificate. And I went from a secondary level on down to a elementary level. So, I had to go in the summer to the high school down here in Asbury Park.

EH: It's only fifteen years ago, hmm. That's amazing.

VM: That was such a wonderful school, Bayview. We had such a marvelous principal. You know, she was young and energetic and so good to all the teachers. That's a nice school.

EH: Who are the students at Fort Hancock that you remember, like the Simpson family? Do you have any real strong memories of like the Duze children?

VM: Yeah, Duze, Joey Duze.

MM: (inaudible) Murray was William Murray's wife (inaudible)

VM: And they went shopping one day at the shopping mall just a block from where they lived. And a car rammed into them and she was killed instantly.

EH: Oh my goodness.

VM: Yet, she was very healthy and vigorous for her age.

MM: She couldn't see too well in the end. She went blind there in the end.

VM: Yeah.

MM: A mother and son going together on a trip all the way down there. They had no thruway.

EH: Do you remember how the weather was out at Sandy Hook? Like winter days?

VM: Bitter. It's so close you know to the water.

TH: I was going to ask what the heating source was in the school. Would it be a coal burning furnace?

MM: It was a coal burning furnace.

VM: Yes, it was a furnace.

MM: I think it made steam.

TH: Steam heat.

MM: (inaudible) The janitors took care of it.

TH: Do you recall, when you were substitute teaching down there, what a typical day? What time it would start for you?

VM: Well, I guess around nine o'clock we started. Well, maybe, sometimes a little earlier. Whenever most of the children got there. Of course, they walked. They didn't have any school bus. It didn't seem like a long day because I always used to do my plan book the night before, ya know, work on that. Everything worked out that way. Everything came in order, you know.

TH: What would you start the day off with?

VM: The flag salute.

TH: The flag salute. And then go into different subjects.

VM: And we sang America.

TH: Really?

VM: Yeah.

EH: Did you check attendance?

VM: And in those days, you know, there was a reading from the Bible.

EH: Oh, that was interesting.

VM: That was when prayer was in the school. I didn't have that over in Bayview because they had done away with it when I taught over in Belford. They did away with the prayer then, atheists. My name Murray.

TH: Right.

EH: Oh boy, how lucky. Did you check attendance, because we have the attendance books in the museum from 1923 to 1933.

VM: Yes, we always checked attendance.

EH: And then you would start off the day with reading?

VM: Well, yes, with reading and then we would have math, which I used to love, because it was the old fashioned math where you taught them how to add, subtract ...

TH: Basic math.

VM: Basic math. It wasn't like that new math. I had new math over at Belford and the bright children would get it very easily but not the slow children. They had a tough time with that new math. I didn't like it. To me it was a little on the boring side.

EH: Did you do like, Geography?

VM: We had Geography and Social Studies. We had Social Studies ....

EH: Did the children bring their lunch?

VM: They brought their lunch. A few of them that lived very close by like the Gooch's, they lived catty-cornered from the school.

TH: Right. That's right.

VM: Mrs. Gooch would ask my sister to come over when she made a cake. She was a great cake baker.

EH: Oh wow.

VM: She knew my sister liked chocolate cake, and every time she made a cake, she would invite her over.

TH: That's great. Would the children have to I guess in the winter months, eat inside the school inside the school room there?

VM: Yes.

EH: Was there a school bell?

VM: Right, and they had some swings. Not too much room there to play, though.

EH: And did you end at 3 o'clock exactly?

VM: And got ready for the next day's work. I used to put work on the blackboard.

TH: Homework assignments?

VM: Right.

(inaudible) (tape cuts off.)

**END OF INTERVIEW**