Edward Leiss

Date: January 15, 1993
Introducer: Phyllis Boeddinghaus
Interviewers: Michael Macan and Scott Randolph
Transcriber: Jennifer Warren, November 2020
Editor: Jennifer Warren, April 2021

Abstract: Edward F. Leiss (1909-2004), the son of Joseph Leiss Sr. and Bertha Leiss, was born in Edison as one of nine children. In 1911, Mr. Leiss and his family moved to Metuchen where his father worked for the Reading Railroad. Mr. Leiss graduated from Metuchen High School in 1928; he was an excellent athlete that participated in high school baseball and football. He was also an avid golfer that had a part-time job as a teenager at the Metuchen Golf and Country Club cutting the fairways. In addition, he played semi-pro football with the Metuchen Triangles. Following his education, Mr. Leiss served as a grocery clerk and manager before joining the Metuchen Police on a part-time basis as a marshal in 1934. He was promoted to police clerk in 1936, and became a full-time patrolman a year later. He became sergeant in 1942, and was promoted to lieutenant in 1953. Mr. Leiss was appointed chief of police in 1965, where he served until his retirement in 1975.

Mr. Leiss was a member of the Young People's Democratic Club and the Sunrise Field and Stream Club. In 1955 and 1959, he won the county amateur golf championship. Mr. Leiss married his wife Mary A. Seluck in 1941 and they had one daughter, Judith Ann (Leiss) Kochy. He won the Metuchen Citizen of the Year Award in 1975.

In this interview, Mr. Leiss discusses his remembrances of Metuchen, which include recollections of his father's occupation, the Depression, the trolley, and the railroads that traveled through Metuchen. He talks extensively about his work at the Metuchen Police Department including his investigation of the McGuinness murder. Mr. Leiss also mentions his job as a caddie, the history of the Metuchen Fire Department, life during World War II, the Metuchen High School, and his opinions on how Metuchen has changed over the years.

P. Boeddinghaus: This interview is under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. It's being held in the Grimstead Room of the Metuchen Public Library on January 15, 1993. The interviewers are Michael Macan and Scott Randolph, students at Rutgers University. This is Phyllis Boeddinghaus speaking on behalf of the Metuchen Historical Society, and Ed Leiss is being interviewed by the students. [recording paused]

S. Randolph: Michael, you have some questions to start?

M. Macan: Well, you mentioned on your–I listened to the first [oral history] tapes that you had made–you mentioned that your father [Joseph Leiss Sr.] worked for the Reading Railroad. I was just curious if you knew what he did for a living?

E. Leiss: **Well, I guess they called that particular job a track walker. He would leave our house in early morning and walk in one direction of the railroad towards the Menlo Park area carrying a heavy wrench and a hammer. The hammer was used in case he found some loose spikes that held the track down with a plate, and the wrench, of course, they had big, heavy bolts that attach to a plate that holds two tracks together: a track walker. And anything that was more serious, then of course he'd have to notify his boss so they could repair the thing. And he'd walk into Menlo Park area were the present Soldiers' Home [Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home at 132 Evergreen Road, Edison] is, in that area, and then he'd come back and he'd walk west on the Reading Railroad to, oh, past that shopping center in South Plainfield. What do they call it? I forget what they call it.**

M. Macan: Oh, the Home Depot?

E. Leiss: **Huh?**

M. Macan: Was it the Home Depot?

E. Leiss: **It's where Hadley's Airport used to be.**

M. Macan: Oh, okay.

E. Leiss: **In that area there. And then he would come back and he would join the rest of the crew that he worked with. He also had at times a three-wheel railroad car (sort of) that worked by his pedals with his feet. He'd get the things pushed a little bit, started, get on there and they just pedaled it like–something like a bicycle. And if it happened to be a train coming in the distance, he'd have to pull over to the side and he could lift one side and just roll it off.**

Well, that would cover that section of the work that he had, of course. And the crew that he worked with would be maybe four, five, six men, and they had a little work shed right nearby. And they also had a train. In fact, my godfather was a big shot on that train and that would cover, both directions, heavy work that might be needed repairs to the track or something like that.

M. Macan: You recall how long he worked for him?

E. Leiss: **Well, my guess would be at least twenty years, at least. Maybe it might even have been a little bit more, I don't know. But it's every bit of twenty to twenty-five years.**

S. Randolph: A question that I wanted to ask you about–this might have been said, you lived life-long years in Metuchen–something that's always been curious to me is what Metuchen was like during the really bad years of the Depression, say I guess 1930, [19]31, [19]32, [19]33, because like you joined the police force [unclear] 1936 or 1938?

E. Leiss: **Thirty-six.**

S. Randolph: Thirty-six. How hard the Depression hit is the question I would ask.

E. Leiss: **Well, I guess it's like every other place. They had the poor people, of course, that could only afford to buy so much, and some of the things were hard to get. In fact, some things perhaps were rationed off. You could only get so much of it. The money that my father made then was–of course, in today's figures, it's quite a difference. But of course, everything costs–was cheaper then. I know my first new car–in fact, the first car that I really could say I owned was a 1932 Chevy [Chevrolet] Coupe. They called it a "Business Coupe." And it cost me $600. Well, I was able to get the $600 from my mother, and I paid her back monthly. The little money that I make, after schools and during vacations, I'd be working at the golf club [Metuchen Golf and Country Club at 244 Plainfield Road, Edison]. Those days, you only had nine holes. Today, it's an eighteen-hole course. It cost you a little bit more than it did then to be a member. [laughter] In fact, I was so surprised when I was talking about it the other day. So my mother did most of the shopping. In those days, we didn't have an automobile alone, couldn't afford one in those days either. And a lot of the stuff that she would get in food would be put on a book and monthly she would pay for it. A lot of that was done, by the way–people just didn't have that kind of cash to go out.**

M. Macan: Do you have any recollection of the trolley in Metuchen?

E. Leiss: **Oh yeah. [chuckles] In fact, where Danford's is today (the store [at 476 Main Street]) and going north on–yeah, I guess you could call it north on Main Street, it would go as far as the end of Main Street where Clive [Street] begins. And I remember we used to hide in the bushes right on the corner across from Danford's. And when the trolley came by, you used to stop at the intersection and then start off. Well, by the time it got past [Route] 27, I would run out and jump on the back end, ride all the way down within a couple hundred feet where it stopped. There was a field there and there was a path that we had. And I'd jump off and run through that field, and another field, and I was home. And then the conductor, he would get out and he'd pull down the–what would you call that?–it makes contact with electricity.**

M. Macan: The guide pole?

E. Leiss: **The guide pole, I guess you'd call it. I don't know. And he'd pull it down, walk around, and put it up there again. Now he could go back up Main Street, see? And he knew us kids very well then. In fact, when we had rainy weather or snowy weather and if the trolley was running, if he'd be down that end, we'd purposely [say], "I'll be there about that time." He'd say, "Come on, get on." He wouldn't even charge us anything. And he would drop us off at Durham Avenue. And of course, we'd walk from Durham Avenue over to the Franklin School there.**

Of course, we had groups of kids then, similar to what we got today, that you know play little tricks on different people. And I recall this one, the group was a little older than I was then, but they got cornstalks tied all up in one group as you see in the fields today. And they put right underneath the Pennsylvania Railroad bridge, right in the middle of the tracks, and when they got the signal from some of the guys that were up near the post office [Metuchen Post Office at 360 Main

Street] that the trolley was coming, they'd light it. And when this trolley got right to where the post office is, he could see the fire there. But they also greased the track with axle grease. [laughter] So what happened was, when he put on his brakes, it didn't stop. It just kept sliding down on the grease. And of course, it hit–it really didn't do any damage, but it–God only knows when, it was a flame, see? But I don't know whether they ever caught up with the kids that did it or not? [laughter] So the kids were mischievous then too as they are today.

At that time, that trolley would run to Amboy [Avenue] and Main Street. And then there would be another trolley that would come from the south end of Main Street and go down Amboy Avenue towards Perth Amboy. They call that–no, down further at the end of Main Street they had also a trolley they called the "Fast Line." And I believe that car went right into Elizabeth, just around where Route 1 is today, right in that area. You get on that thing, it probably went fifteen or twenty miles an hour, you know that was the "Fast Line" then. Because that other, that Toonerville or whatever we called it then, on Main Street, you could run faster than that car. [laughter] But a lot of people would ride it. I don't even know what it costs for a ride down. Probably for a nickel, you could ride from one end to the other.

M. Macan: Do you remember why it was called the Toonerville?

E. Leiss: What's that?

M. Macan: Do you remember why it was called the Toonerville?

E. Leiss: No, I don't know why. In fact, I think that's what they call it today. But we referred to it as the Toonerville. Why the name? I don't know. I remember the conductor. I guess they call him a conductor. [Eugene] O'Hare was his name. But as far as the kids were concerned, they liked him. He was a nice sort of a guy; you know he would give you a ride going home if he saw you sometimes. He knew us kids, he knew about every kid where they lived and what grade they were in.

M. Macan: Did he live in Metuchen?

E. Leiss: I don't really know. Yeah, I don't really know.

M. Macan: Can you tell us a little bit about when they finally dismantled the trolley and took it out?

E. Leiss: Well, they start, because Main Street wasn't paved then and it had its ruts and holes and everything else. And then of course, if we had a dry spell, there was a lot of dust when the cars would go there. And you know a few people had cars, but we had the old horses and buggies. They would park along Main Street then. The exact year that they finally did away with it, I don't remember. I used to know, but I can't remember. But I know they picked up a lot of the tracks right in the heart of the town, and I think going south and even towards Clive Street, you dig up the highway, you'll come to those tracks, covered in [unclear] a little bit. Yeah. And about that time, I think they also start paving Route 27 [Middlesex Avenue]. That was one of those dirt roads too. But I don't know the year and it had to be, I would say, in the late twenties–yeah, late twenties perhaps

when they were doing away with it. Whatever happened to the cars, I don't [know].

S. Randolph: One last question on the trollies because this is an area of particular interest for Mike and myself. Do you remember what they did with the [trolley] car when it wasn't running? Was there a car barn or a place that they kept it? Or was it just kind of left on the end of the line the next morning?

E. Leiss: **I think they had a car barn in Bonhamtown area, right in that area where I think The Victorian Manor is now [Royal Grand Manor at 2863 Woodbridge Road, Edison], or in that area somewhere, I think. They had somewhere around where Route 287–or is it around Division Street or thereabouts?–they had a little side track. In other words, if our car had to go up that far, he knew just about the time the other cars had come down that way and then go down Amboy Avenue. So he would go to that side car, and that other car, the faster line would go by, and then he would proceed to the end of his stop and then go back again. But the car barns, I know they had them. But to put my finger on that spot, I can't. [coughs]**

S. Randolph: You want to talk about railroads, railroads in general in Metuchen?

M. Macan: Yeah. There were three railroads that ran through Metuchen, right? There was the Reading [Railroad], the Pennsylvania [Railroad], and the Lehigh Valley [Railroad], right? Now as we understand it, there used to be a passenger station and a freight station for the Lehigh Valley Railroad. I guess the question is do you remember anything about that? Where it was? Because right now there's nothing, there's very– [unclear] trains don't even run on those transit.

E. Leiss: **The station then was [on] Durham Avenue, right near Gulton Industries. They called it a freight station, I think, or something like that. And of course, they had a track that–the first track that you went over, went and joined up with what is now–well, the Pennsylvania Railroad it was then. A train could go from South Plainfield and get on that track. And then they [Lehigh Valley] had two other tracks that you would go–and in between those tracks was the station. And they had the two other tracks that went to South Plainfield and I guess even further into Plainfield areas, somewhere over there. And the other direction, it would go to Perth Amboy through the Fords area and whatnot, which is–I guess the tracks are still there. In fact, the borough is trying to make some kind of a walking area [Middlesex Greenway].**

M. Macan: Like a linear park or–?

E. Leiss: **Something like that. The train probably had about two cars on it. And how far it went in South Plainfield area, I don't know. But they had quite a few trains over there and other tracks that led further, other areas. And the one that went to Perth Amboy, I think that's as far as it went and it would come back from there. I think there was a connection where they could go pick up another track and take them into South Amboy area or down the shore or something like that.**

M. Macan: Now the connection track between the Lehigh Valley and the Pennsylvania, that's where that–it's all covered with trees now, but as you go down Middlesex Avenue, there's stone abutments, and now that's where it used to be?

E. Leiss: **Yeah, it [Lehigh Valley Railroad] used to go across there.**

M. Macan: Okay, do you remember when they took out, I guess, the bridge part of it? [laughs]

E. Leiss: **That I could only maybe guess at it. And again, I say it's got to be late twenties or very early thirties. I feel as though it's in the twenties when they did away with it.**

S. Randolph: Do you remember riding on the Pennsylvania to go to, say, New York or New Brunswick?

E. Leiss: **Well, those days, we didn't have too much money to–even though it didn't cost that much. But then again, the whole money value wasn't very high either. But there would be no reason for us to be going to New York as a kid. I don't even remember first–well, yes, I do. I was taken to New York one time by the caddie master at the golf club. I happened to have number one badge. It was a little gold badge; you know you were supposed to be the number one of the other kids that were caddies. And for the one that the caddie master liked or felt that did the best job as a caddie, he would take into New York. And we would go to some fancy place there, and they would have a show there, and we'd have a meal and everything. Oh, I was lost in New York. But it was fantastic for a young kid to see the buildings and everything else that they had, and then the train ride and all. And each year, he would do the same thing. He'd pick another caddie and the next year he'd do the same thing. It finally stopped, but I don't know. That was in the twenties, I think, because I used to work at that golf course after schools and during my vacation. In fact, the mower that we had then was a one-seater. It had the blade that spun around and a roller behind it, and we'd hook it up to a horse. And on the horse, we'd put leather shoes with a rubber sole on it so that when the horse stepped, he didn't leave marks, at least too bad. And I would just run that mower back and forth, back and forth, and cut the grass. And by the time I get finished with the nine holes, I had to start cutting again. [laughter] Today, they got the mowers that with one swap, they cut half of the fairways there.**

S. Randolph: Do you have anything about the history of the fire department in Metuchen? As I understood it, there were two separate buildings, one is adjacent to the current firehouse and the other one on Main Street.

E. Leiss: **Yeah, the Washington's [Washington Hose Company] and the Eagle's [Eagle Hook and Ladder Company]. The Eagle's were at Main [Street] and Penn [Pennsylvania Avenue] next to where–well, there used to be a pharmacy [Metuchen Pharmacy at 396 Main Street] there. I think it's an ice cream place there now on the corner?**

S. Randolph: Yeah, or something.

E. Leiss: **Yeah, the firehouse used to be there next to that [at 398 Main Street] and they had a couple of bowling alleys in there and their rooms were upstairs. And they had that old sliding pole, and they were upstairs instead of going down the stairway.**

S. Randolph: So they were like a full-time force then?

E. Leiss: **Well, it was all volunteer. I don't think Metuchen ever had a paid fire department. They get some kind of little bonus, I think, each year if you made so many fires. But it was all volunteer and I don't recall when they had horses pulling the fire trucks. In my memory, it was trucks. And the whistle then was right where the Gulton Industries [at 212-250 Durham Avenue] is. They used to have a horn, and that thing blasted off. You could hear it all over town. And it would–whoever pulled it, the horn, the number of–he would pull it so many times and then he'd hesitate. In other words, if he pulled it three times, then he'd hesitate. Now he'd pull it two more times or four more times, that meant thirty-two or thirty-seven. And any fireman would know just about where it is. So instead of maybe running to the firehouse to get on the truck, they would get to that fire if they had a way of getting there or they would run to the firehouse if they're nearby. And of course, both companies would respond to the fires. And of course, today, they still have the Eagle's and Washington. But of course, the Washington used to be next to where it is today, that little building there [at 505 Main Street].**

S. Randolph: Do you remember when they left those buildings? When they moved into just one building together?

E. Leiss: **Well, you got me stuck when you start asking about when these things–**

M. Macan: [laughs] Well, as we understand it, what's now the firehouse [at 503 Middlesex Avenue] used to be the municipal garage?

E. Leiss: **Yes. Yes, it was. And finally, they decided that they would like to have that firehouse so–as a firehouse, I think we had part of the building there where we kept some equipment on the left side of that building, police equipment. We kept it there, bicycles that were found, or maybe an auto or two, or something like that. Then the fire department spread out a little bit. Of course, they maneuvered to see if they could take over that other part of it too, so I don't think the borough has anything or the police there have anything there. It's all fire equipment.**

Now that hunting club that we started in [19]38. We used to have our meetings upstairs over the building next to it where the firehouse was. We paid, I don't know, a couple of dollars each month for the use of the building there. So they were still in effect up till 1930s, and it was after then when they started changing the fire department from that old building into the present building. The old building was run by oh, Judge [John C.] Bowers, they called him. He was a notary. And what do they call it? Justice of the Peace. We had state police then that patrolled [Route] 27 and any arrests that they made nearby, they were tried by Judge Bowers in his garage [at 503 Middlesex Avenue]. He had a little office in there. So again, I say that when–I'm trying to think–I went on in [19]38 and the police department must have started somewhere around 1909, 1910, even before that. In fact, I think years ago before they even had police, they had citizens that would go out in the evening, just walk around, and they would be known as vigilantes. I think that's what they call them. Because I was only a little kid then. When I was a little kid, they already had a police department. So that had to be 1913, [19]14, somewhere like that.

S. Randolph: Were the police always located at Borough Hall here?

E. Leiss: **Yes. Yeah, of course they renovated the building from what it used to be. The police that–and I can't seem to remember, it was before my time, it was right over the hardware store, Donald Hume's place there then, that's closed down now: Metuchen Hardware [at 401 Main Street].**

S. Randolph: Yeah, right.

E. Leiss: **Their headquarters were upstairs. In fact, the court was held up there, upstairs in that building.**

M. Macan: The library was there for a while too, wasn't it?

E. Leiss: **What's that?**

M. Macan: I bet the library was there for a while.

E. Leiss: **Yes, it could be.**

M. Macan: It was like a big hall. I forget what the name of it could be? It had a different name. They actually named for it, something like that.

E. Leiss: **I think it was named after Smith Hall[1], was it? [Daddy] Smith was quite a well-known guy in Metuchen, whether he owned it then or they got it from him or he rented it out? I don't recall. And I don't recall then when the police headquarters was there.**

M. Macan: Right. I have a question about–you were on the police force I guess from 1936 until 1973.

E. Leiss: **Seventy-five.**

M. Macan: Seventy-five. If you can tell us any stories about some of the mayors of Metuchen while you were on the police force?

E. Leiss: **Well, it was a mayor and council. You had six councilmen and [if] a tie vote, of course, the mayor would vote. And we were quite a political town here. In fact, we would wind up with a Republican mayor, for instance, and there'd be three Democrats and three Republican council. So when a vote come up, and it was tied, if it was a Republican mayor, he would vote Republican! Well, politics didn't change even today. It was right down the political line. And then come election time, low and behold, we'd wind up with three Democrats and three Republicans, but the mayor was a Democrat. [laughter] See? So now it would work the other way. The Democrats would be bosses. And sometimes it would last for quite a few years the same way. Then all of a sudden, then maybe the people got fed up with present members of the council and the way they voted. So they changed it around and they got it so that the mayor and had maybe four Democrats and two Republicans. Or it would be all Republicans or all Democrats. Well, then they run the town the wrong way. Politics as I say, still stays the same way, even today. If it's a Democratic council, they want to run it**

[1] The name was Robins Hall at 401 Main Street.

their way. Whereas the people get fed up with it, and those days, the people got mad at something, they change the council, either the mayor or the way they voted.

S. Randolph: You want to talk about public transportation? Do you recall anything with your experience in the police force [that] kind of maybe stood out, like maybe a bank robbery? Was there anything like that?

E. Leiss: **Well, I think the one thing that I certainly can remember and that happened I believe in 1938. It was my day off and I came home that night around one o'clock in the morning and my mother said, "You better call headquarters. They've been trying to get you." Of course, I was the eighth man on the police department. Well, there was eight of us. So I called and the lieutenant says, "Get down here right away and we have [William] McGuinness has been murdered." Well, everybody knew [William] McGuinness, he ran a tavern at the Ratskeller, it was called, which was right where the bank building is on New [Street] and Main [Street]. Oh, then they moved from that area over to where Morris Stores is now. And it was still called the Ratskeller. And it had a front entrance right off of Main Street, and next to that entrance, there was a boarded fence or wall and a door that lead to the entrance to the inside of the Ratskeller. They had a little room in there where they had meetings of different organizations and whatnot. Or if you wanted to drink, you could go in with your wife or lady friend or something and have it in the room.**

And apparently, [William] McGuinness, the owner, every night at one o'clock, they would leave there and go next door to the corner where there used to be a restaurant and have their coffee in or something before going home. Of course, he would always take with him a money box. Well, this one night after he closed, he went in with his bartender and had the usual cup of coffee and the bartender left to catch a train to go to New Brunswick where he lived. And of course, the owner McGuinness, he left to go into the building where he lived [at 419 Main Street]. And shortly after he left, they heard this shot and the Greek, the owner of that restaurant, went by the window, you know he just thought some automobile, tire blow or something. But he saw the man come out of there and fall right there on the curb. And that was [William] McGuinness. So immediately he called the police. And of course, when the police arrived, apparently they got him to the hospital, but apparently he was gone then. And the money apparently he [the murderer] did not take (money box). It was all intact.

That was investigated for many, many years. They had all kind of ideas who it might have been, but they never really solved it. The finger was never really put on the murderer. As I said, everybody had an idea as to who or how it happened. Somebody was in waiting there for him that knew when he closed up, knew he was carrying the money. Now the end of story was why didn't he take the money? Well, of course, they thought the money–he ran out after he was shot and fell on the curb. And of course, the streetlights, they had lights then. Maybe whoever it was didn't dare to run out to grab the money box for fear that he might have been seen. We don't know. And the gun was never found. I know we searched that backyard there where of course Morris Stores is today. There was an alleyway that came out through to Pearl Street.

And of course, the other ones were a couple of cars that were hit on the Pennsy Railroad, which is now Grove Avenue. They have a bridge there [now]; a crossing used to be there. And a car got hit there by the trains. One incident, I was working, and I was on traffic duty at Main and Penn Avenue to get the commuters that came home on that one train. And it was a drizzly night and freezing. And waiting for that train to come in, all of a sudden, I see this train pulling up, and I went out to get ready for traffic duty, and the whole front end was like a fire. You know you are thinking, *What is this?* And as it came to the railroad bridge, it made an awful noise. What it was, it was the car that was hit on Grove Avenue. And it just made a U out of that car in the front of that engine. And when it hit the bridge, which is no room there, it just squashed it in more so. So of course, I went to the radio right away and called headquarters and I said, "Hey Dave, you better ring that fire alarm because number one, that front of that train is burning." Which they did! Of course, I went to Grove Avenue. I thought that car was hit there, and as I get almost there, in fact Grove Avenue was very slippery then, the main drag was all right. And I see this young fellow walking and I looked at him, he said, "I guess you're looking for me." I said, "Why, your car?" He said, "Yeah." His car slid off the crossing there because of the ice and it got in between the tracks so that it would just skid around. He couldn't get it out of there when the train–when he saw that train lights, he just jumped out and ran. So thank God nobody was hurt, but there was the damage. The motor was thrown about 300 feet.

Then of course, there was another one where the train going towards New York, we got a call and I sent one of the officers there. I was at the desk then, and we found the car, but no driver. So I got somebody to take care of the phone and I went down there. And we looked around, sure enough we found the body out in the field! That's how it was thrown. And then of course, we had a local resident that decided apparently to commit suicide. She stood in the middle of the track there one time, and got hit. And that was kind of a messy job. Those things, they stand out in your mind because you can't forget them.

S. Randolph: Do you remember when they eliminated the grade crossing [at Grove Avenue] and put in the bridge? How long did it take them?

E. Leiss: Well, that's got to be in the forties, late thirties, early forties. I don't know. That's my guess.

S. Randolph: Do you remember anything about Metuchen during the years of World War II? I heard a lot about gas rationing, just you know generally, people recycling metal. Was Metuchen very active in the war effort?

E. Leiss: Yeah, they had right in front of the Borough Hall, they had a little cage built there out of chicken wire, I guess. And anybody and everybody that had the [unclear] that they didn't know what to do with, they threw it into that container. And it stood right there in the corner, and people–you know everybody knew about it. And that thing would get filled up and somebody, the borough would take it to wherever it was going to be used or whatever factory there. And gas was rationed. Kilmer of course started over there, Camp Kilmer. And we had some problems with some of the soldiers that coming into town and having a little too much to drink. And what we would do, instead of making arrests, unless it was something bad, we would bring them in and call the provost marshal at

Kilmer and they'd send a couple of the officers down and take them back in, and let them worry about what justice should be.

Well, we had a couple of break-ins that wound up to be soldiers that came back [from war]. In fact, jewelry store windows crashed in one time and somebody came in, reported it. And I was on duty then or outside, I happened to be in headquarters, so I jumped in the car and off I went down Main Street. And of course, I went by the jewelry store and it was nothing you could see there then. But I got to New Street and I thought, *There's no sense in looking on Main Street because it's too well lit up*. So I cut down New Street–no, I went right straight down Main Street near the railroad and I thought, *No*. No, I did go down New Street! I'm trying to get this thing straightened out. And when I got to Pearl Street, I happened to look to the left and I thought I'd seen somebody run to the left. Two people. So I turned around, I went out to Main Street and right to where that video store is. It was an open field, little opening there and it was a feed store [at 389 Main Street]. Just as I got there, I saw this one guy run behind the feed store. Well, I went down after them and when I got past the feed store, now it's dark in there, but I could hear footsteps. I know there was two people running. It was so dark, you couldn't see. So there's a little path behind the feed store, and I'm running, I can hear the guy. And I got a flashlight. And all of a sudden, I don't hear–no running at all. Well, I know there was two, it dwindled down to one running so one guy got ahead of the other or something. The other one, I'm feeling he–so I just walked along and there he was laying there right on his stomach, his hands out, his hand is bleeding. There's an old fireplace there where they burned papers and whatnot, you know no incinerator, it was just an opening there. And he plopped down there, he landed on some broken glass. I said, "All right, get up boy!" He got up and I sided him off and I held up my hand, I said, "Now, you start marching!" And I said, "Keep them hands above your shoulder!"

He was a good-sized guy and I wasn't about to tackle a soldier that just came from the war area. I marched him out Pearl Street all the way to [Route] 27 and then I made him turn right and I went right straight to police headquarters. And I got him in there, and of course, I turned him over to the sergeant then and of course, we searched and put him away. He was from Camp Kilmer. And then I went back over there and I found a couple of wristwatches where he had fell. So I knew we had the right guy. And during our investigation, we called Camp Kilmer, and they called back later and said, "Yeah, we got the other guy for you too." He admitted it. And they searched his area where he slept or something, they found a couple of wristwatches in his shoes that he had then. And the guys, they weren't from around here. One I think was from Michigan. I don't know where the other one was from.

I say it's things like that that I can recall that happened where I was really involved. You know, you could go on and on. And the small little town, everybody knew everybody else. One thing, even today, the police, they hate to go to a family quarrel because usually it winds up, the husband goes out, he gets drunk, he comes home, and she hollers at him, he don't take it from her anymore because he's got a lot of courage, and maybe he does a little slapping around and of course we come and he don't want to go with us. And we make him and put him in, once he wakes up in the jail the next morning, he's a different person. So he pays his little fine and scolded and told, "Don't come back here again!"

M. Macan: What [unclear] the direction of going into police work? What led up to you joining the force?

E. Leiss: **Well, believe it or not, I never even really give it a thought at that time. Although I wasn't working. I got out of a job. I came out of high school, believe it or not, and my first job was over there on Midland Avenue at Gigan [phonetic] Cesspool Holes, five by five by five in the homes that they were building there at the time. And then of course I dug some–the center of Midland Avenue at that time when they were putting the sewer line. I was helping on that. Just a laborer's job, and of course, when that was more or less finished up with, I was out of a job. And I'm in the diner then that was right where the Texaco Gas Station, right near there was a diner, always used to wind up there and have a cup of coffee. And the sergeant came in then, who wound up the chief, [Enos] Fouratt, his name was, he says to me, "Hey, Leiss, how would you like to be a cop in Metuchen?" Well, if that's the way it got me, I said, "Yeah, I would like it." "All right," he says, "you come over to headquarters and maybe they'll swear you in as a marshal." That's what it was called then. Today, "special cop" they call them or something or "special policeman." Sure enough, I went over there and I was introduced to the commissioner, can't think of his name then. And the council when they met, they appointed me as a marshal. Now, I worked then only when one of the policemen, the seven policemen, was on vacation or his day off or maybe somebody got sick. And I was getting three dollars an hour. I liked it.**

S. Randolph: Now how many hours a day were the shifts then, the different ones?

E. Leiss: **No, they were eight hours. While I was on one of those jobs taking the place of the officer that might have been sick or on vacation, the commissioner came to me and said, "We want you to ride a bicycle." [background siren] Well, you can just picture me. I put my badge on my civilian clothes because I had no uniform then, and I got a bicycle that I was supposed to ride around the town. And I went down Main Street, I'll never forget, and I came to Chestnut Avenue, not thinking, and after I turned right and I started going, Chestnut Avenue starts to go up a hill, see? And I'm thinking to myself, *Now, why did I pick on a street where I've got to climb a hill?* So of course I cut off of one of them. And I think that was the only day that I … [recording ends]**

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

E. Leiss: **[recording starts mid-sentence] … it might be a good idea. I think some departments [unclear] because you know you can go in back of the buildings where you'd normally be walking around and nobody will hear you. And you can sneak up on somebody and surprise them. And anybody that's trying anything, he's going to be a little scary about it, feel that for fear that he won't be able to see anybody coming up in the dark. So I don't know. Some towns I guess use them.**

S. Randolph: Metuchen has had a long time of police officers walking up and down Main Street as we understand. And that continues today.

E. Leiss: **Well, they stopped for a while. Apparently, they put two men in a car. One of my first shifts when I came on was from eight p.m. to four a.m., and that was my beat. I would walk up Main Street, go all the way to the borough line practically, up into Brunswick Avenue area, and then I would–coming back I would go down one block and walk maybe, get back out on Main Street, and then of course mostly in the store area I would try every door. And believe me, you could find doors open almost every night. People forget to lock. And I'd go around the back and you know if there's any doors back there or entrances, I would try them. At four o'clock in the morning, I was finished. And it got so that I would go home at four o'clock in the morning and sleep practically from then on till the next day. And then it got so when I went on the next day, the next night, come four o'clock, I wasn't sleepy. The worst thing is when you lay down and go to sleep, you can't sleep right away and it's annoying.**

Then I guess I got a little promotion. I would come in at eight o'clock and the sergeant then would go out and I would take care of all the write-ups, the books, and the filing, and everything else. In those days, in a couple of hours, you could finish the whole day's work that they put in, see? Today, it's a little different. You had the accidents that we had in one whole year sometimes you can get in one month today with the traffic, of course, build-up. So I kept at that until I got the regular out-on-patrol with the card. Nineteen-hundred-forty-one, I was made a sergeant. And then in 1953, we lost our lieutenant and I replaced him. And of course, 1965, I went on as the chief. So I made $9,000 when I became a chief, which to me was a lot of money a year. And of course, when you compare with today, I think the chief makes I guess $50,000-$59,000 a year? It's quite a difference. I don't regret it. I think certainly you meet an awful lot of people and a lot of strange people. I think the worst thing that I hated to do was when I was dealing with a mental person. And especially a woman. Because a mental person, if he's a male, you can manhandle him a little bit in trying to help because sometimes he'll battle you. Where a woman, you got to be careful how you handle them. And the worst job that I hated when I somehow always got picked if a person had to go to Marlboro [phonetic], it was me that had to take them. And I hated that because it's pitiful. [chuckles] Those are part of the things you run into. But if I had to do all over again, I guess I would.

S. Randolph: Now, when you became chief, how many police officers were there in town?

E. Leiss: **I had thirty-five men under me. And it stayed that way right up until practically when I retired. And then of course, in the meantime, there was some that retired also. And I think it dropped down to twenty-seven or twenty-eight. They didn't replace them. I guess budgets were a little high. And today, I understand they've gone back to–they'll have thirty policemen. They're slowly getting back to where the original was then. And they kept changing around. When I became a lieutenant, I was second in command to the chief. I was chief lieutenant and we had three or four sergeants. Then of course, they had the State come in to evaluate the department or something. And they said, they booked–the things that should be done, you should have a total of thirty-five men, you should have three captains, and a lieutenant. That was changed around a little bit. That was just about the time when I retired. Then they went back, and today you got a chief and I guess deputy chief (well, I guess they call them, some of them only captain), but he's next in charge. And then they have a lieutenant. And each one**

has a department under him, like the Patrol, the Uniform Patrol, the Juvenile, and the overall Chief of Police.

M. Macan: Today's Metuchen police has, what I understand, a separate detective force, sort of its own department.

E. Leiss: Well, it's part of the police department. And I guess they have a sergeant that is in charge of that. Plus he has maybe two or three detectives under him, I think. And of course their job, you know whatever cases come up, crimes of any kind, usually one of them gets on it.

S. Randolph: Yeah, but the detectives aren't regular patrolmen; they don't have patrolmen duties. Is that correct?

E. Leiss: Not unless it happens to be an emergency of some kind or maybe a real shortage of sick days, somebody off. I remember in my day, I was sent out to do school traffic. I went right out here, Main [Street] and Middlesex [Avenue] many a morning. Sunday mornings I didn't like too much when it was zero. [laughter] And of course, I just had my plainclothes on and I would do traffic duty at Main and Amboy [Avenue]. The school guard was sick or too cold for her or him. And I did traffic duty at Main and Brunswick Avenues. The funny part of it, after I retired, I wound up as a school guard for a while. And the reason was, I did not have enough quarters in my social security to be able to collect. So the first job I got was a starter at Tamarack Golf Club [in East Brunswick], the county course. And my job there was whenever anybody come to play golf, I would tell them when they could go out and start playing. And I picked up some quarters there. Then I got a job in a grocery market where the present A&P is in Edison. And I picked up some quarters there. I worked in the produce department. And then I wound up the school guard. I knew I had enough quarters that I had made and I went to New Brunswick to the social security office and everything turned out all right. I get a little social security, it's minimum, but it's something. As you see, as a policeman today, I think they take the money out for social security. In those days, you didn't. So that's the reason I was packing those quarters.

S. Randolph: When you first came in, you mentioned that you recognized my name, called grandfather [unclear]. Tell me more about–?

E. Leiss: Well, the Randolphs lived then on–is it Plainfield Avenue? You go up past the Metuchen [Golf and] Country Club, you turn left. Is that Plainfield Avenue or Park Avenue? You turn left, and I think the first building on the righthand side, that's where the Randolphs lived.

S. Randolph: Because I know that my grandfather Donald [Randolph] and my great-uncle Richard, who were in the house on [259] Amboy Avenue, two or three houses down from where the Corner Confectionery is [at 275 Amboy Avenue]. There's the Corner Confectionery, and there's that radiology building, and that next building over is where they were born.

E. Leiss: Yes.

S. Randolph: And I understand, that that was there. My grandfather left, but my uncle Richard stayed, as I understand, in Metuchen or Edison until he passed away.

E. Leiss: **Yes, now that you said that, I think I remember that great big house I think on the righthand side.**

S. Randolph: Yeah.

E. Leiss: **Across the street from the Randolphs was Williams, Walter Williams. He was in that five-and-ten outfit and the company [F. W. Woolworth Company]. He had a big–oh, it was a big mansion[2] back there. Since that time, of course that building has been ripped down and they've got other buildings there.**

M. Macan: Now you graduated from Franklin High School?

E. Leiss: **I'm thinking Randolph. Does it sound familiar to you if I say a butcher?**

S. Randolph: I believe so. Yeah.

E. Leiss: **There was a little short fellow [Raymond Randolph] and they worked as a butcher [at Metuchen White Market] on [415] Main Street. Oh, it seems so long ago. And I think his name was Randolph.**

S. Randolph: That was my great-grandfather. Great-great-grandfather.

E. Leiss: **Well anyway, those things bounce up once and a while.**

S. Randolph: You were talking about the high school?

M. Macan: Oh yeah. You graduated from Franklin High School when it was still a high school, right?

E. Leiss: **Yeah, I started there in the kindergarten.**

M. Macan: So then they had all twelve grades?

E. Leiss: **Yes. And I worked my way up to the senior class and graduated in 1928. I played on the football team, baseball team, basketball–didn't have too much of that. But I never played too much basketball. But football, [brief interruption] I remember as a freshman I was put in one of the games we were playing South River. The jersey that I had on me–of course, they had the "Metuchen" or "MHS" or whatever on–it had on the back, big letters "Eureka!" Whatever that stood for, I don't know. But at least it was a jersey. [laughs] In those days, you could pick up a fumble and run with it. And somehow or other when I was put in, we were beating South River pretty badly. In fact, I think it wound up 45-0. [laughter] And there was a fumble, I went to pick up the ball and go for the goal line, and as it happened, my foot kicked the ball a little further. And all excited, I finally picked up and I ran. And just about the time I wanted to step over the goal line, somebody's hand come on my shoulder and I dropped. And I remember the quarterback saying, "All right you guys, make a hole for him and give it back to Leiss. He got it this far." So they made a hole for me and I made a score. I was so**

[2] The mansion owned by Walter Williams was known as Roselawn and it was located along Park Avenue near the intersection with Plainfield Road. The building has since been demolished.

proud that I made a touchdown, only a freshman. All our football games were over where the Campbell's School is today. Our locker rooms were at the Franklin School and then we would get into our [unclear] and walk up to Durham Avenue and then over to the field where we practice on.

M. Macan: Did the freshman play Highland Park at that point? The Thanksgiving game with Highland Park [unclear] at one time.

E. Leiss: **I don't think Highland Park had a football team. I don't think so. I know my freshman year, we had a terrific team. I don't even think we even lost a game and we played teams like New Brunswick and Plainfield. And you know today those teams are out of Metuchen's class. The next year when I became a sophomore, we lost the whole first team of last year. The only one to come back I think was the center. So we had to rebuild. Sorry to say, that year, we finished without winning a game or scoring a touchdown. But we did tie Woodbridge 0-0. [laughter] That's the way it goes. [laughter]**

M. Macan: Someone had told me a while back, Franklin School had a fire [in 1957]. Do you remember anything about that?

E. Leiss: **Yes, I sure do because our Chief Fouratt, then I was a lieutenant, and he was on a convention, International Cheese Convention, I think, in California. So I had taken over. I know I was out in the car that I was riding around in and I was in Seldow's [at 410 Main Street] for something and the fire whistle went off I'm thinking around noon or something. And I ran out to the police car and picked up the radio and they said, "The high school is on fire!" So I go over there. God, when I saw that smoke coming out of the top there. Of course, that burned down, the auditorium part of it. And they never rebuilt it. They just put a roof down one other story. And I thought, *Oh!* So I ran back and I said, "We need help!" So I called Perth Amboy, I had the officer's desk, "Call Perth Amboy policing! Get them over here with that ladder." You know they could reach up there because our trucks couldn't. Well, they had to be down below and by the time you got that water from down below, it didn't have the pressure to go any higher. And with the ladder, it could get them up in the air and pour it right down there. But I have a feeling if we had a ladder truck then, we might have saved more of that building because it spread from one end all the way down to the other end. And what damage wasn't done, the smoke did the rest. And I think that was around 1960, maybe [19]57 or [195]8. Somewhere in there, I'm not quite sure. It could have been the whole school, but we had help then from Perth Amboy. And I think Edison came around, they all were–we had a lot of help there as far as firemen are concerned.**

M. Macan: It was soon after that, that they started to build the present high school.

E. Leiss: **Yes. That was soon after that, that they figured they need a–that wasn't big enough for a high school anymore. And furthermore, that auditorium was condemned then. We used to hold all our–what do you call it in school today where you get the whole school together?**

M. Macan: Assemblies?

E. Leiss: **Assembly. That's where they used to go, and apparently they checked it out, found out it was scary to allow all those people up there at one time. So it was only used as a study room for a classmate. Of course, then they decided that they need a new high school [at 400 Gove Avenue], which we have today.**

M. Macan: What was over there? Was that just a field, or was that a farm where they put the high school?

E. Leiss: **Oh, it was a farmer lived there and his house used to be–it was couple of houses there, couple of small little houses. And it was a field, it went all the way back to where those houses are back there. And I used to hunt there for rabbits, pheasants, years ago. That's where they took over. And of course those houses were ripped down and the whole thing was opened up, of course, as it is today, that whole area.**

M. Macan: Let's see, is there anything else you want [unclear]? [laughter] Is there anything you have in mind that you want to talk to us about? I'm running out of time, [unclear] our thoughts.

E. Leiss: **Well, I've been through so much of this that I suppose even some of the things that I've said is probably a repeat from the time before. I know the problem Metuchen has today is traffic. And you know when they built [Route] 287, they said, "Oh, that's going to be good. That will alleviate the traffic problems." And my contention always was if you clear up traffic problems in one area, it's building up somewhere else. They're even talking about it again, a stretch in [Route] 27 so it goes right straight past Gulton [Industries] and comes out on 27 up near where Boro Motors was [at 901 Essex Avenue]–it would be a straight–it wouldn't be that turn here and then traffic lights underneath the railroad and another turn. But apparently the State never went along with it. Now they are going to try and see if they can do that, but [2]87 did make a difference. But now people, they used 287 and then they picked on 27 to go up to Iselin. So it was practically through the heart of our town. And I guess you fellows have seen it, what it is. It's murder if you want to go up towards Iselin around three o'clock in the afternoon <u>or</u> in the morning before nine o'clock when people are going to work. It's just bumper to bumper. And unfortunately, I don't know how it's going to help unless you build an elevated highway or something. And I'm sure that's out.**

But everybody's got cars today. I live in Redfield Village [Apartments along Amboy Avenue] and when I first moved in there, there was a parking place for me or, if I wanted, a garage. Today, I'll come home, day or night, and there's no place for me to park there. [chuckling] I either have to go across the street and park on where Walgreens is today; it used to be the Acme [Supermarket] lot. Of course, in the wintertime, if it's snow on the ground, I can't leave the car there because the plow comes through early in the morning. And Redfield Village, they got some young people in there that–each one has a car, where it used to be, years ago, there was one car and one family. So it's not only a problem here now, I guess it's a problem everywhere. And of course, they keep saying they want to build a Foodmart over there at that F. Co. [phonetic] property. Well, when you build something like that there, which isn't there now, it's bound to bring more traffic out to Central Avenue. And if you look at traffic on Central Avenue at

different times of the day, it's bad. [laughter] No question about it. And it only can get worse.

S. Randolph: Another question, cutting us back a little bit, I don't know how long the Metuchen First Aid Squad has been around, but I'm assuming that before that, you know there wasn't much going through Metuchen. So what sort of things did–was the police department responsible for a medical emergency?

E. Leiss: **Well, yeah. And I repeated this before, I had a New Year's Eve–any of you fellows know what New Year's Eve is. And of course, it was my day to work or my night to work, which I didn't like, see? But I had to like it. And sure enough, I parked right there in front of what is now [unclear]; it was Montagna's [Restaurant at 660 Middlesex Avenue] then. And it's I guess two o'clock in the morning or something like that and I heard glass breaking. And I thought, *Where did I hear that?* It had to be across the street. And sure enough a light came on one of the homes there. Well, I got on my radio and I said to the deskman, "I got a problem across from Montagna's." I said, "Somebody busted a window upstairs so I'll be out of the car." And I went over there and I came to the door, and she (the woman) says, "Oh, you got here fast." She had meantime called the police headquarters, see? And I told her I was parked across the street. Well, apparently they were out having fun and I guess her husband drank a little too much, and I guess an argument ensued and maybe a little slapping around. And she took a knife out and put a little Z on his chest, he didn't have no shirt on, and one of them slices was right here [gesturing to his body] and I saw that blood. I said, "Uh oh!" So I said, "Get a towel and wrap his neck up good. Cut that blood off." And I said, "I'll be right back. We're going to put him in the police car." I called headquarters and told them–or I got him out to the police car and I called headquarters and I said, "I'm headed for the hospital in New Brunswick."**

S. Randolph: And that's where you would go before there was JFK [Medical Center in Edison]? You'd have to go all the way to New Brunswick.

E. Leiss: **Yeah. And we got to New Brunswick Middlesex Hospital. I was told, "Sorry we have no room, no beds." I said, "I've got a man bleeding to death out there." "I'm sorry we have no room," believe it or not. And I jumped in the car and I went up to St. Peter's [University Hospital in New Brunswick], had no problem there. Fortunately, the guy turned out all right. They stitched him up and everything else. And today, he is still alive and he's thanked me many times for what I did. If he needed an ambulance, we would have had to call one of the hospitals. They had ambulances then, see? But by the time you got in an ambulance from Perth Amboy or New Brunswick, you know time was important there. The fact that we got the First Aid, it's wonderful, but it's hard to get people during the day. They are always crying they need help. People are working then, they can't get off. And not everybody likes first aid work. So that's the problem they are all up against, I guess.**

M. Macan: Do you think the character of the town has changed over the–or do you think that I guess what attracted you to the Metuchen site at the turn of the century towards the thirties and forties is still around today? Do you think Metuchen is so different than the other towns around it?

E. Leiss: **Oh, definitely, definitely. Metuchen was a town where everybody knew everybody else. I guess you probably heard that said many times. And it's true. As a patrolman on the street, and I walked, as I said, I walked during the day and I walked at night, I met an awful lot of people. I used to meet the trains when they come in, and of course people get to know you. And today I can walk down Main Street, I can almost walk the whole distance of Main Street, and [I] don't recognize anybody. And of course, the commuters that come in the town; they're from all around here where they park in the commuter area. No matter what store you went into, everybody knew you. I could walk in a lot of the stores today, they wouldn't know who I am. Of course, I have been out of the police force for what, 1975? That's what, twelve years or more? So you say, "Is it any different?" I say it was a big difference. Of course, if it's traffic, which I mentioned before, yes, the traffic problems are a real headache. How are they going to overcome it? I don't know. The population has gone down from what I understand. I think it used to be somewhere up in the 17,000. And now it is, I think, maybe 2,000 difference, I think.**

M. Macan: [unclear] more than overall, it's like 12,000 or 13,000.

E. Leiss: **Well, somewhere in that area. So are the people moving out, or I don't know? Maybe if they live as long as I did, you stay put where you are. That's it. [laughter]**

S. Randolph: Well, I think we're just wrapping.

M. Macan: Yeah. We'd like to thank you for your time. We enjoyed it.

E. Leiss: **Well, if I've helped somebody out with what I have said, fine. I hope I didn't hurt anybody's feelings from what I said.**

M. Macan: Oh no. Not at all.

E. Leiss: **But you know maybe somebody in years to come hears this and it will be much different then than it is now, which I guess it will be. But Metuchen was always known as the "Brainy Borough." And I guess you fellows know that, don't you?**

S. Randolph: Yes, I do.

E. Leiss: **And they say that the "Brainy Borough" name came because, at that time, there was some very rich people that lived in town and they were very smart and intelligent. And that's why they called it "Brainy Borough," I guess. That's the way I heard it.**

M. Macan: That's the way I heard it. Thank you very much.

E. Leiss: **Well, you're quite welcome.**

[END OF INTERVIEW]