Paul Fenton

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Interviewers: Ruth Terwilliger and Martin Jessen
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, 2004 and Jennifer Warren, November 2019
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Abstract: Paul Fieldhouse Fenton (1898-1980) was the son of English immigrants Rev. John Fieldhouse Fenton and Elizabeth (Butler) Fenton. His father immigrated to America in the 1880s, graduated from Princeton University in 1888, received a PhD in law from Columbia University in 1891, and studied at the General Theological Seminary in New York. His father's first pastor assignments were in Burlington Country before moving to Metuchen to serve as rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church for thirty-one years from 1899 to 1930. He was also examining chaplain for the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey for thirty years and served a civilian chaplain at Camp Dix during World War I.

Mr. Fenton moved to Metuchen as an infant and was raised in the St. Luke's Parsonage at 17 Oak Avenue. He served briefly in the U.S. Navy during World War I and graduated from Princeton University in 1920. Mr. Fenton worked as a clerk for Pennsylvania Bell and later as manager for the New York Telephone Company until his retirement in 1975. He married Elizabeth (Ennis) Fenton and they settled at 368 Middlesex Avenue where they raised their two sons: Paul Jr. and Richard Temple. Mr. Fenton entered into politics during the 1930s as overseer of the poor, head of the police committee, and Democratic councilman for the Metuchen Borough Council. In 1968, he authored a church history titled *A History of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Metuchen, N.J., 1868-1968*. Mr. Fenton was also director of the Metuchen Savings and Loan Association, chairman of the Metuchen Chapter of the American Red Cross, vice president of the Central Assembly of the Diocese of New Jersey, and member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church and the Metuchen Rotary Club.

In this interview, Mr. Fenton discusses his father's work as pastor of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, his memories of Metuchen during the early days of the twentieth century, and his involvement in local politics. He also reminisces about living at the St. Luke's Parsonage, the Metuchen Club, and his World War I and work experiences.

Interview note: There are several parts of the interview that were difficult to transcribe due to the fast nature of Mr. Fenton's speaking and microphone issues.

R. Terwilliger: [recording begins mid-sentence] … Mr. Paul Fenton's home to do an oral taping of his life history in Metuchen. I am very pleased this evening to have as my companion interviewer, Martin Jessen, who is chairman of our local [Metuchen] Historical

Commission, and also a lifelong resident of Metuchen. I would like to mention that today's date is December 17, 1974 and that Mr. Fenton's home is at 368 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen. Mr. Fenton, let's talk about your father's move to Metuchen. [recording paused]

[recording begins mid-sentence] … assignment to St. Luke's [Episcopal] Church. Perhaps you could tell us about what year that was and what the atmosphere in Metuchen was like at that time.

P. Fenton: **[loud noises from microphone] … Metuchen prior to about the turn of the century, and of course I [went] along with him at that time. That was the beginning of a thirty-one-year tenure at St. Luke's Church [from 1899 to 1930]. My father [Rev. John Fieldhouse Fenton] had no previous contacts with the town except on a facetious basis. He remarked that when he used to take the train to New York, you came into town and passed a cemetery and as you left the town, you passed another cemetery. [chuckling] And also, he had been told in college that the glacier [Wisconsin Glacier] had stopped in Metuchen. Curiously enough, the same man who told him that, told me that. And in talking to Norman Ferrara, I understand that that's on the Rutgers University field trips for the geology group. But my father apparently came here by assignment and they used the term euphemistically as "being called." But actually, the bishop has a lot to do with it. And I think he came to this town because of the–he was a low-key pastor, and I think he would be at home. They thought he would be at home in this town, which it turned out he was.**

My mother [Elizabeth (Butler) Fenton], who came from Worcester [Massachusetts], had a little closer tie-in with the town because her mother, who was named Adams, who belonged to a people living in Portsmouth [New Hampshire]. As you know Portsmouth and Kittery, Maine, the Piscataqua River flows through that. And apparently a group of people from that town left Piscataqua to come down to this area, hence the name Piscataway[1]. And included in that group of people were one of her ancestors, and she was quite interested when she arrived here to find out she did have a tie-in with the community. Apropos of mentioning prior to talking to you about these so-called lifestyles against the way of life, about two or three week ago, I saw a picture of a bunch of Yalies taking a train up to the Yale-Harvard [University] football game, which meant that they were attending the game by train. My father recalls going up to the Princeton-Harvard game in 1887 where he stopped off to see my mother, and the only thing different about the way of life was that the ticket cost fifty cents and the souvenir button cost twenty-five cents. [laughter]

But getting back to Metuchen, it was a congenial community. He [father] was a low-key operator, you might say. And the same time, he was active in civic affairs; he was chairman of the [American] Red Cross, overseer of the poor, he was a three-minute man, and chaplain at Camp Dix [in Lakehurst]. As evidence of this so-called empathy, despite the fact that he was rather frail (and left for that reason), he addressed the high school football rally–was asked to address that the year in which he retired [in 1930]. So that, in a sense, indicates the climate he came to which, as I said, was congenial for both sides.

[1] In 1666, Piscataway was inhabited by Quakers and Baptists who had fled the Puritan colony along the Piscataqua River in New Hampshire. The township was incorporated on February 21, 1798, and it is the fifth-oldest municipality in the state.

R. Terwilliger: Mr. Fenton, may I intercede a moment by asking you now–let's talk a little bit about the family itself. It was your mother and father, yourself, and you had a brother?

P. Fenton: I had a brother [Rev. Arnold Alexander Fenton].

R. Terwilliger: A brother and any sisters?

P. Fenton: One sister [Elizabeth P. (Fenton) Hopper Ewald].

R. Terwilliger: And one sister. So it was a family of five.

P. Fenton: That's right.

R. Terwilliger: That came to Metuchen.

P. Fenton: At that time, it wasn't five.

R. Terwilliger: When you came to Metuchen, how many were there?

P. Fenton: It was one. I was [unclear].

R. Terwilliger: You were the one. The other two were actually born here in Metuchen then?

P. Fenton: That's right, yeah. Born here in Metuchen.

R. Terwilliger: I see. And how old were you then when you came here? About how old were you?

P. Fenton: Well, within a few months of 1899 or something, whatever it is.

R. Terwilliger: Uh-huh. And where was the [St. Luke's Episcopal Church] Parsonage then?

P. Fenton: The Parsonage [at 17 Oak Avenue] was in one of those mansard-type roof houses, which were indigenous to that particular era. Well, the church is a masterpiece in architecture[2]. That house was an anachronism in the sense that it was thirteen rooms and mostly unheated, it seemed. So that was where–and it's right there where the educational building [Fryer Hall] is concerned. Right now, there is a remembrance garden, which has been recently installed and there is a memorial involved, which you probably noticed in the last six months. And the house apparently stood just a few feet away from that, which is to say that speaking from the cradle to the grave, my journey from the cradle to the grave won't be too long if I end up in that Memorial Garden. So that's where it was. And of course, during Dr. [William Hugh] Fryer's time [from 1956 to 1969], that's where that building was [unclear] done.

R. Terwilliger: Can I ask you something? Do you remember the day you moved here?

P. Fenton: No, no, no.

R. Terwilliger: You don't remember the day you moved here?

[2] Constructed in 1868, the St. Luke's Episcopal Church is a representative example of the Carpenter Gothic style designed by well-known ecclesiastical architect Richard Upjohn.

P. Fenton: **I was only weeks old, I guess.**

R. Terwilliger: Weeks old. Well, then can you tell me a little bit maybe about your first recollections of that house? The heating system, or your room, or parishioners, or something about what you felt about this home and where you lived?

P. Fenton: **Well, that's easy because your remembrances come fairly, fairly quickly at that age. Now for instance, I think the first recollection I had of the town basically was a big–they tell me that the [St. Francis] Catholic Church, which is now celebrating its hundredth anniversary, the church, which was almost a counterpart of St. Luke's, burned down. And I think that was about 1903 or [19]04[3]. Now, I don't remember it. I think vaguely it comes through. I suppose the first time I remember anything physically was a very severe hailstorm[4], which swept through this part of the country. And the basement, I noticed the [hail]stones were as big as golf balls and apparently it peppered every window in the [St. Luke's Episcopal] Church. And I'm sure that [unclear] your mother, or somebody who might have heard about it or particularly at Perth Amboy, it just blasted one side of Smith Street to smithereens. So that of course became very, very clear in my mind. Now on the more tangible aspects, there are certain things that stand out and I've mentioned this a number of times. If you live in a rector's house, you take a rather charitable view of people mostly because you heard nothing at home uncharitable. And when you did hear anything that might touch on it, it would be more in the form of an amusing anecdote. We weren't expected to set a good example.**

R. Terwilliger: You <u>were not</u> expected?

P. Fenton: **You were expected–**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, you were.

P. Fenton: **No, you weren't expected to set a good example. But heaven help you if you set a bad one. [chuckling] And that's the kind of feeling you have when one travels in Spain or Russia, the feeling that there are no rules until you break them. Because you know in the wings, you have a built-in group of critics. Well, I think that's probably more true for women, for the girls of clergymen. For instance, "Jersey Lily" Langtry[5], whose father was Anglican clergyman in the Isle of Jersey [United Kingdom], she and her father had a very fine rapport. But despite all her bizarre life, she went back to her father's church to be buried. So there is a relationship, which is quite wholesome between the families of the clergymen. But as I say, you are a sitting duck and for that reason you have to be a little more guarded than you would be if you were just somebody else when it comes to [the] world.**

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[3] The first wooden mission church was built in Metuchen in 1871; it was officially incorporated as St. Francis Parish in 1878. In 1903, the church structure was destroyed by a fire when an oil lamp accidentally overturned. The second wooden church was dedicated in 1904. The present-day St. Francis Cathedral was built in 1961-1963.

[4] According to *St. Luke's History Magazine*, Metuchen experienced a severe hailstorm in 1906 that broke most of the original amber windows on the church.

[5] Emilie Charlotte Langtry, nicknamed "The Jersey Lily," was the daughter of Rev. William Corbet Le Breton, who was rector and dean of Jersey. She moved to London in 1876 and became a famous socialite, actress, and producer. In 1929, upon her request, she was buried in her parents' tomb at St. Saviour's Church in Jersey.

R. Terwilliger: Now was this a verbal understanding? I mean did your father talk to you children about these things, that you also represent the church? Or was it just an unspoken kind of a [thing]?

P. Fenton: **That's right. In other words, there are no rules until you break them. And they were dealt with in a fairly mild sort of a way.**

M. Jessen: What kind of heating system did you have in the building?

P. Fenton: **We had a hot air heating system, which apparently was an outgrowth of the stoves, which were put in from room to room with flue openings at various levels. And of course, it had a rather pleasant use around Christmastime because what they would do was Santa Claus, you see, would talk down one of those flues to somebody and he'd [chuckles]–pretty soon your father, who'd be out on the horse or whatever the case may be or something, would come in, you'd tell him all about it, and then after you'd get to be old enough to be more or less suspicious anyhow, you realize it's strange that he wasn't around. [laughter] And then there was always a box of candy, which came down those flues, following which you'd put aside a cigar for Santa Claus. So there was a certain way of life built up around, on publicized things. So getting back to heating, that's where the heat was. But the heat–**

M. Jessen: How about the cooking?

P. Fenton: **Well, the cooking was a coal range. You had to watch your steps when you came in the back stairs, which was ridiculous because there was no need for the back stairs. But you had to walk softly to guard against the bread falling and so forth. And they were very heavy. And of course, the plumbing was archaic. I mean it all went into a cesspool, and then it had–a lot of people maintained well water.**

M. Jessen: Did you have city water?

P. Fenton: **City water was there as far as I know at that time. The gas didn't come until later and the telephone, of course, came along all in one fell swoop. But apparently the sewer line, as you know, didn't come in until the city ran a lake for a community of this size or that size. They didn't worry about the cosmetic element in this town. [laughter] They just put them in under pressure and got it out of them, they had to do it [unclear; loud background noise] the sewers. But in those days, everything was cesspool.**

R. Terwilliger: Did your mother have help or did she run this Parsonage herself?

P. Fenton: **No, there was help.**

R. Terwilliger: There was help.

P. Fenton: **Two types of help: one in the kitchen and the other one was the one who lived in the barn. He had an apartment in the barn, and of course–**

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember these people's names?

P. Fenton: **Oh, I remember this fellow [unclear; chuckles]. Fellow in the barn was old sage born in Ireland; he was raised on the sea. And he would go on sabbaticals every so often. The first thing my father knew, he'd get a call from someplace where Frank was putting out the lights in the station on the basis that he was told to keep the lights down. [laughter] But he was very slowly character. But I must admit I probably learned more from him than I did in Sunday school!**

R. Terwilliger: Isn't it great? [laughs]

P. Fenton: **And my brother who was at Mercersburg [Academy in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania] at the time when I was just getting into the automobile competition and it got to be quite a game as to who was going to use the car. The things you would devise to keep one from using the automobile against another. And this fellow, Frank, was very heavy-handed with the oil. One time, I remember we had an Opel, about 1916-15 Opel, and he noticed the brake pads as being old, now to him looked as if they needed a shot of oil. [laughter] So my father had to go somewhere in a hurry and came out of Oak Avenue onto Route 27 [Middlesex Avenue]. [laughter] And those brake pads worked all right, but they just added a fill up to the whole speed of the car. So he and my brother apparently used to enlist his help in taking them to see that one got the cars against another. Another one of the tricks we had was that we'd take the spark plugs and put them together, you see. And of course, as we know and Frank knew that he saw one of us doing it so he would–he kept his eyes peeled. So he found out how to do it too. So he wanted to see if it worked by then, he took a screwdriver and put his hand on the windshield frame and said, "Give it the gun!" [laughter] We gave it gun and of course he got–**

M. Jessen: Had a needle on that. [laughter]

P. Fenton: **So apparently there was a man who of course it was, who put them all together. And I guess later on, I put down the price that people got in those days. You could realize it was a really great hardship.**

M. Jessen: What were the roads like?

P. Fenton: **Roads were macadam roads with people who kept going on the berm if these things weren't too good. And they would be pot-marked and they would be like a poor filling of a tooth. You know there'd be ridges around it, frost would heave it, but they were solid. This was the old Morris and Essex Turnpike[6], and of course that came.**

M. Jessen: Was there much traffic on Route 27 there?

P. Fenton: **That was the original Lincoln Highway.**

M. Jessen: Right.

P. Fenton: **And as a consequence, it was the main artery listed in the travel books for California. But then there were times when the traffic was horrendous. You take a Princeton-Yale football game and the only way they could go through that [unclear]**

[6] He may possibly be referring to the Middlesex-Essex Turnpike, which was constructed in 1806. The route is now known as Route 27 or the Lincoln Highway through Metuchen.

would be through New Brunswick and through Metuchen over that bridge by Kline's Hotel [phonetic] and every stop light, they got men working on it. That was part of congestion, and then of course a lot of people would just use it to go places. And they had this Woodwild Park and installed one of these fountains[7], which still exists in principle. In fact, the [Middlesex] Water Company[8] are technically supposed to continue putting water in there all the time; they wanted the low one for dogs and the upper one for the horses. But the Stanley Steamers, you see, would come along and so that was a stopping place for Stanley Steamers[9].

R. Terwilliger: This is the fountain that sits on the little island?

P. Fenton: Lew Peck [phonetic], Enos Fouratt, and [J.] Arthur Applegate might of went down and looked at and realized that that was a blind where it was. So he suggested we move it back, so it doesn't have any function at all now except the kids that jump on it or tear the plants out that we put there.

R. Terwilliger: Right. But it was actually a horse trough then, and the lower one was for dogs? And there is something in back. Was that for people?

P. Fenton: That was for people, yes.

R. Terwilliger: That was for people in the back. I want to get us back on our little outline here so we don't miss anything of your–

P. Fenton: Well, I think you were talking about the church itself and the [unclear] people.

R. Terwilliger: Right, and church life. I would love to know more about your father. You know what kind of a minister was he? Was he the fire and brimstone?

P. Fenton: No, no, no. He was anything but.

R. Terwilliger: Or a very gentle man?

P. Fenton: He went to Princeton [University] and then he got a PhD [Doctor of Philosophy] at Columbia [University] in field of public law. So essentially, he was trained in the law. And his seminary work was probably offset by overlapping courses and so forth. So he was essentially a scholar. In other words, he was examining chaplain for the [Episcopal] Diocese of New Jersey and as such he would be so [unclear] as a scholar. So that was the basis upon which he operated and I think that's why the community, including this community, where a group of people–I think this is probably the time to mention, St. Luke's was junior to a lot of churches around here. In other words, I

[7] In the early twentieth century, the Metuchen Building and Loan Association donated a triangle piece of land at the intersection of Oak Avenue and Middlesex Avenue to build a public drinking fountain and horse trough. Following several fundraising efforts, the cast-iron fountain was purchased by the Woodwild Park Association and was erected in 1903 at the edge of the road where it was accessible to horses. With the increase in automobile transportation, the fountain was moved back from the edge of the road to where is presently stands. The structure was restored in 2016.
[8] The Middlesex Water Company offered to supply free running water to the public drinking fountains as a means of generating interest in their service.
[9] During the early twentieth century, Stanley Steamers were steam-engine cars that used the horse trough to refill their boiler water.

think St. Luke's was the last of the churches back in 1868. I know the St. Francis is just a few years behind.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

P. Fenton: **But the other ones, the [First] Presbyterian Church[10] had been in business for a long while, the Dutch Reformed Church [formed in 1857], the [Centenary] Methodist [Episcopal Church, formed in 1866] and so forth. But the Episcopal group apparently came out as part of the potpourri of people who came out to live in the country. They were city people; they weren't the people who grew up and [were] raised in Metuchen. And some of those names would ring a bell if you'd been going through them [in] the *Times*–I mean the *Literary Times* like *Courier*, Princeton. I just made a note here where you came, and that is a lot of those people stayed in town, didn't go away, and yet they were anything but bucolic. I mean they were very sophisticated people.**

When they had the fiftieth anniversary of St. Luke's Church in 1918, the only member on the original vestibule was Henry Mills Alden, and that's a man who was well known. He was an editor of Harper's Magazine (the dean of the magazine) and his son-in-law was [poet] Joyce Kilmer, who wrote *Trees*. And he was married in St. Luke's Church; he married Mrs. Corbin[11] [incorrect name]–oh, Mrs.–and then there was the [George S.] Silzer[12] and the Waite family, Captain [Cephas K.] Waite. The house where Harry Wilbert lives [at 6 Plainfield Avenue], I think is where Mrs. [Federica Fidelia (Benner)] Waite lived (Captain Waite)[13]. And those people had been in town and Lou Riggs (Mrs. Riggs) [phonetic], who is living now in Texas, her grandfather was on the original St. Luke's rectory. The Molineux family go back; McKeowns had some father or grandfather [William Sutton Duncan] who was a member. And the Robins, Nate Robins [Nathan Robins], the Robins family, over here [at 443 Middlesex Avenue]. The Robins living practically across the street from the church and their–I don't know where their father or grandfather–the grandfather, I guess, would be on the original–so there was a continuity about it. And one of the men who lived almost across [unclear], Frank Hay [Francis S. Hay at 28 Oak Avenue], who died about ninety-three, I heard he's ninety-three not too long ago, he almost saw the whole church develop. It was a strange thing because the St. Luke's Church, the Metuchen Club, the [Metuchen] Savings and Loan [Association], the Woodwild Park all seemed to be interlocking in terms of people.

M. Jessen: Going back to Mr. Robins, that's the Robins of Robins Hall [at 401 Main Street]?

P. Fenton: **Yeah.**

M. Jessen: And that's where Metuchen Hardware Store is today?

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[10] The First Presbyterian Church in Metuchen was originally known as the Second Church of Woodbridge and was established ca. 1784. The Metuchen congregation officially separated from Woodbridge in 1793.

[11] Joyce Kilmer married Aline Murray Alden, the step-daughter of Henry Mills Alden, at St. Luke's Episcopal Church on June 9, 1908.

[12] George S. Silzer was a prominent member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church and the former governor of New Jersey during the 1920s.

[13] Captain Cephas K. Waite and his family lived in the house at 36 Clive Street. Mr. Fenton describes Captain Waite as one of the founders of St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

P. Fenton: **That's right. That used to be movies; that's where they had the Firemen's Balls.**

M. Jessen: Watermill [phonetic]?

P. Fenton: **Watermill [phonetic], [*H.M.S.*] *Pinafore*.**

R. Terwilliger: Was that ever the Borough Hall too?

P. Fenton: **Yeah, sure. They used to be the recorder's office[14].**

R. Terwilliger: Was that used as the Borough Hall? This is where Metuchen Hardware is now, right? That was Robins Hall.

M. Jessen: Now also, now Robins had a hotel [Hillside Inn] that was up on Inn Place?

P. Fenton: **Well, that was [David] Gross. Now, when they call it Robins, I don't know what then–I think they called it Hillside Inn[15]. It was set back on the hill; if you walk up there now on the top of the hill where Verne Fowler [phonetic] lives (I don't forget his name), you look all over the whole town. That was a hill and that was an inn. [alarm clock ringing] In fact, people used to stay there periodically. It would be like the Metuchen Inn on [424] Middlesex Avenue.**

R. Terwilliger: Now are you talking now behind the National Bank. Is that the hill?

P. Fenton: **Yes.**

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, where Ruegger's building is in back there.

M. Jessen: Well, back towards the railroad [Pennsylvania Railroad] from that. But now, people came there from New York City and stayed during the summer. Wasn't that just like a summer resort?

P. Fenton: **Yeah. In other words, periodically when they're waiting for their house to be built, they wanted to–I know John MacLauchlan [at 204 East Chestnut Avenue]–when they wanted to, when they came out to build a house, they would stay at the inn and then they would go along and keep track of the contractor when he was building the house. By the time they build a house, they'd put a branch on the top of the ridge pole [along the roof].**

M. Jessen: So they'd have good luck.

P. Fenton: **Yeah.**

M. Jessen: That's a must. Now you mentioned the Savings and Loan. The Savings and Loan took part in developing this area around Woodwild Park. And then a lot of those lots were sold to people in New York City then.

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[14] According to Ruth Eby, the second floor of Robins Hall used to be the town clerk's office.

[15] The building was built around 1875 and served as the home of Nathan Robins on the east side of Main Street between Hillside Avenue and Highland Avenue. It was later remodeled and became the Hillside Inn, which was owned by David Gross. The building was destroyed by a fire in 1925 and was eventually demolished to make way for commercial buildings.

P. Fenton: **Yes, yeah. Maybe a little later I can tie those in with my club because that–can't get too much care romancing, but that is a peculiar organization and the whole history of that Savings and Loan revolves around that particular tract, various phases of it.**

R. Terwilliger: Well, let's not skip too far ahead though because I am interested and I'm sure anyone who listens to the tape will be interested in hearing a little bit about family life as the parson's son in Metuchen. Did it have a theme of any kind? Did spring mean church picnic?

P. Fenton: **Well, now you're talking into the whole mores of the day. In other words, the whole community was integrated. In other words, when you had a *Pinafore*, everybody went to the opera. If you had a Firemen's Ball, everybody went to the Firemen's Ball. If you had a strawberry festival, everybody'd go and bring home strawberries. I mean there was no question, but what everybody–and they had a Dancing School. Everybody went [to] Dancing School. They had a Glee Club.**

R. Terwilliger: Now this is not just church-oriented you're talking about, this is town-oriented in other words?

P. Fenton: **There were certain things which were ambivalent. Like for instance, they had a baseball league made up of churches, and they got pretty good competition. I mean Ralph Noe, who died a long while ago, he's gone passing away, he was a better ball player. [laughter] And Crosby Clarkson, who was a very famous hockey player, was a good athlete so that they had certain competition along those lines. But the social life for the people who had been here a good many years and who had gotten established with other members of the community with whom they were congenial with, belonged to this Metuchen Club.**

R. Terwilliger: You mentioned that when I interviewed you. What was the Metuchen Club?

P. Fenton: **Well, the Metuchen Club was the outgrowth of the building, which is down there now, the Masonic Hall [Mt. Zion Lodge No. 135 at 483 Middlesex Avenue].**

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes.

P. Fenton: **That's the location. And in those days, I have pictures of that club, the Metuchen Club burned down. And rather amusing because either somebody, two gentlemen who'd have to be identified, were walking at two o'clock in the morning after a friendly game of cards and one said to the other, "Do you think–you see that building burning down?" And there's a big discussion as to whether the building was burning or not. [laughter] It burned all right; there's no question about that. But what they would do is, they would use that club for all sorts of dances. They had a bowling alley and the roof of the bowling alley acted as a bandstand for the tennis courts so that the women would go down there, much as the same as they could have [unclear] at a bottle store. They would show up on Saturday morning and there they'd stay until early Sunday morning.**

R. Terwilliger: Now what were the surroundings like around that building? There weren't any houses built all around? There were houses built?

P. Fenton: **Because the houses, which were on the other side of Middlesex Avenue, you see two houses took up that whole section. First there was a house that was burned down there a few years ago and then the one which is now up on Chestnut Avenue[16] was in that area too. So there were only two houses on that side of the street.**

R. Terwilliger: That's the old [Dr. Charles C.] Mook house, was there?

P. Fenton: **That's right. So the BIL [Borough Improvement League] was there [at 491 Middlesex Avenue] and then there was a [John C.] Bowers Garage[17] [at 503 Middlesex Avenue]. That was the end of the line. But the activities, they had bridge [card game] almost once a week and they had all sorts of things.**

R. Terwilliger: Did someone actually run this or was it–?

P. Fenton: **No, it was a community and they had free dances and people statewide.**

R. Terwilliger: But this was kind of a community center then, the social center of the town?

P. Fenton: **That's right. But it was social in the sense that it was by membership. In other words, it wasn't conducted for profit.**

R. Terwilliger: Right, yes.

P. Fenton: **But the tennis was the controlling thing, but then it ended in the border there; looking at the border [unclear], you had all sorts of things that would seem in congress for nice day with me. First of all, you had a racetrack between here and Plainfield. Branningham [phonetic], I think, was the name of the fellow whose house lived there. And they used to have some pretty hot races over there. Now I don't know the gambling phase of it; I didn't know about. [laughter] I must have been, but it was all done in–**

M. Jessen: You're talking the one was just on the other side of the Reading Railroad?

P. Fenton: **Yeah, way over there.**

R. Terwilliger: This is horse racing you're talking about?

P. Fenton: **Sure, horse racing. Let see, what else was there they used to have? Oh, I know. There were minstrels. Now see those were the days when minstrels were very much–and swimming. You would, if you, that's when they could swim, you go down to Mill Pond [in Bonhamtown] if you wanted. If you had time to take a box lunch, you'd go down to a place called Martin's Dock and you had brackish water down there by–where that big hydro plot–what is the name of the big hydro?**

M. Jessen: You mean on the Raritan [River]?

P. Fenton: **Yeah. I know the combustion engineering, some combustion engineering place out over there, over by the railroad track.**

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[16] He is referring to the former Stagecoach Inn along Middlesex Avenue that was relocated to 231 East Chestnut Avenue. The building was demolished in 2003.

[17] John C. Bowers Garage was also known as the Metuchen Automobile & Garage Company.

M. Jessen: You mean down on Crows Mill Road down towards Keasbey way?

P. Fenton: [muffling from microphone] … heading towards–it was near where the [Raritan] Arsenal was. I mean coming towards New Brunswick.

M. Jessen: Oh, well that's–

P. Fenton: Silver Lake.

M. Jessen: Silver Lake [Avenue], yeah. Well, that's where the Public Service [Enterprise Group] Generating Station [at 164 Silver Lake Avenue], yeah.

P. Fenton: Public Service, that's right. It was international combustion engineering and of course the company ... [unclear; muffling from microphone].

M. Jessen: Combustion engineering is still around. I think where you're talking about, that's all abandoned now.

P. Fenton: Yeah, that's it. But that was a swimming, so that was in a–

R. Terwilliger: Where was Mill Pond now? I want to know.

P. Fenton: On that Woodbridge Road.

M. Jessen: Mill Pond was right where the New Jersey Turnpike is now, and the spur of the Pennsylvania Railroad that goes out to the Arsenal where they intersect. That's the upper end of the Mill Pond, and it went from there towards the river, oh, maybe 1,500 feet. It was a good-size pond.

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting really.

P. Fenton: And of course, for a nickel, if you really wanted to spend the money, you take a trolley car to Perth Amboy. Then you spend another pittance to go across on that ferry to a place called Sea Breeze [in Staten Island, New York].

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes.

P. Fenton: And you had a built-in summer vacation because always somebody whose family were down there for the summer which gave you access to a fence or something that you could use to change your clothes in. [laughter] So there was no great big deal like Sea Breeze; you have to have a Jersey coastline. And somehow it always seems cooler down there. I think you could probably bring–and that section, curiously enough, hasn't changed too much. The old Conference House is located in that area, and I've never been able to find out why they haven't been condominiums or something because it's a beautiful view.

M. Jessen: It's New York City. That's the main reason.

P. Fenton: That's right. It's the last outpost of New York, and New Jersey never had a crack at it.

R. Terwilliger: Now your family took advantage of this close proximity to bathing and swimming. Did you go as a family?

P. Fenton: I wouldn't say that we had family gatherings, no. You went as a gag. I think there was nothing novel–I mean I don't think you–Tally-hos [coach] and everything that people would get together with on horse shows and things of that sort. There wasn't too much [unclear] participation. I think that's been overstated.

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting to know.

P. Fenton: They had plays. And of course, they had a Delphic organization, which was a player's group. It was one of the earliest in the State of New Jersey. St. Luke's had Parish Players with Eliot Corbin-ran shows that were incomparable to any show that's showing on the silver stock [movies]. And of course, there's some very good talent, Miss Eleanor Metter [phonetic], Mrs.–

R. Terwilliger: Oh yeah.

P. Fenton: And then of course, some of those people were still around them; Mrs. Lippadat [phonetic] was in the cast, I know, at some time. Mrs. [G. F.] Shiffmayer so that–

R. Terwilliger: How about Mrs. [Sarah] Coerr? The one who had the electric–

P. Fenton: She wasn't. She was no actress.

R. Terwilliger: I think she was an opera singer, though. Wasn't she?

P. Fenton: No.

R. Terwilliger: No?

P. Fenton: Mrs. [Alyce] Edgar. Mrs. Harold Edgar apparently had been some professional singer [unclear]. Of course, that's another facet of the life which apparently was more or less related, I think, what St. Luke's and the other churches you had some of these people like Mary Wilkins Freeman, who was a Pearl Buck [novelist] of …. [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

M. Jessen: [recording begins mid-sentence] … in Metuchen?

P. Fenton: Well, that's right. And I'm thinking in terms of–I mentioned going to school in New York. I can recall a very traumatic experience when the *Lusitania*[18] went down because my father, the night before I literally was–we went to city, [he] asked me if I would do an errand for him and then took me out to the yard and told me that he

[18] The *Lusitania*, a British ocean liner, was torpedoed by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915 as an act of warfare against England, which had implemented a naval blockade of Germany during World War I. The ship sank in eighteen minutes and killed 1,198 passengers.

thought that my uncle George [L. Vernon] was on that ship. And he wanted me to verify it and then see what I could find out. So I went down the next morning with Cunard line and I found out unfortunately that he was on that ship. And I also found out that he left also on that same ship was his sister-in-law Rita Jolivet, who at that time had been playing in *Kismet* [on Broadway] in New York. I can't think the name of her leading man, but he was well-known, I know. And apparently, she was the only one saved of the group. John Vanderbilt [Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt] and Charles Frohman, her manager, and my uncle had all gone. When I was in an Ireland, couple years ago, I went over to the cemetery in what was then [unclear], in those days it's Queenstown. It's now Cobh [Harbour]. And I saw the [Old Church] Cemetery, a part has been set aside for the burial of those who had gone down on the ship.

Also getting closer to home, there are certain things that used to harbor over the fall or the peril and that was the matter of polio, and diphtheria was a killer, there was no insulin, no salt vaccine. Then there was the matter of having the appendix rupture on you, and firecrackers and getting in trouble on the Fourth of July. And it wasn't all as pleasant as it sounds when you read about it. There was, however, one thing that didn't exist and that was there was no wars on the horizon so we didn't have one particular hazard of living, which had been overlooked.

The shops on Main Street, I think, you had mentioned previously. And I said that they were sort of hodge-podge and rather difficult to picture. And of course, the trolley car, which features in so many pictures today, has been portrayed so often that I think it's become a fixation of the people who are the younger. Growing up today, they've seen so much of it. But there was that spur line which ran from middle of Main [Street] and Amboy Avenue to the end of the line out by the Port Reading Railroad.

R. Terwilliger: What was the fare? Do you remember?

P. Fenton: Well, I think everything was a nickel. That seemed to be the going price for everything in those days. I know it was five cents to Perth Amboy and New Brunswick, and I suppose maybe the ride went long in extension to five cents or else there was penny or two-cent loading charge. But there are very few shops, to be sure. And there were so few that in many cases they had to double up on the things that they were selling.

R. Terwilliger: Well, let's mention some of the stores that you mentioned when I talked to you in the outline. It was Kramer's Department Store, was there then at that time.

P. Fenton: That's right. If Kramer didn't have it, you had it. Until such time as an article became hard to get and then of course, he was the only one that did have them.

R. Terwilliger: Now was there a local grocery store? Was the A&P there at that time?

P. Fenton: There were no chain stores. They were [unclear] to a lot of people anyway for some reason or other. I think there was an apt chain the one time called the American Stores. Number one I think out west, [Piggly Wiggly] and various types of chain stores. They didn't have any particular field. And the reason there was a popular field is that those people didn't go shopping. I mean that wasn't there; they weren't

keen on going around the stores and the tradition of that. They used to go around in there on the days and take the orders in the morning and deliver the produce in the afternoon. And the stores, I said, had various combinations that person's [unclear] with the store. They carried oysters and papers, and Harry's carried candy and printing. And the [unclear] from when you mentioned [Benjamin] Ford's (Mrs. [Catherine] Ruttiger's father), they had a hardware and a grocery combination [at 468 Main Street].

M. Jessen: How about [James] Barr's?

P. Fenton: Barr's was [unclear] of several people who got together to form the Metuchen Hardware Store [at 411 Main Street]. Barr, I think, was the–mostly there was the man [unclear] usually remember most about him, but there are others.

R. Terwilliger: You mean bar bars, don't you?

M. Jessen: No, [James] Barr was Mildred Moss' Barr [father]. He used to live over on [76] Spring Street.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, I thought you were talking about a bar.

M. Jessen: No, they call them saloons.

P. Fenton: They were saloons or bars or any form you want to talk of them. But the Hillside Inn, of course, was the one which stood out because it was up on a hill and it was actually used as a residential hotel when people had some reason not to be in their own homes or just wanted to come back and visit. I think I admitted too, I suppose, and tell about the garages as they existed in those days. There was [John C.] Bowers, was a garage, he was a justice of the peace, and I'm afraid there was a period in this town they had bad reputation of the automobile people. They clearly operated a speed trap, and the way they operated that was they had a signal up on Middlesex Avenue and they'd signal this fellow was going too fast. So they'd immediately clock him from some other given point. And then if they found he really was over the–it was thirty-five or forty miles per hour, which would be I don't think conceivable they could be that fast. Then they would send him in and get out there in blue uniform and wave him down if he didn't stop. Then someone who was further down the road would throw rope across the road. [laughter] And then as a consequence, they were there wheeled into traffic court and the matter was adjusted right on the spot. But that was the only indication I ever had of the town really going into that bucolic approach.

M. Jessen: That garage became the Borough Garage.

P. Fenton: That became the Borough Garage.

R. Terwilliger: That's the one right down on Middlesex you're talking about?

M. Jessen: Yeah, that was Bowers Garage [at 503 Middlesex Avenue].

R. Terwilliger: Uh-huh. How about fire protection? Was there a volunteer fire department?

P. Fenton: **There were two: Eagle's and Hook and Ladder [Eagle Hook and Ladder Company and Washington Hose Company]. They were not only well-represented in membership, but they were all rather dedicated people and they got on the job. In the book, which I put out for St. Luke's[19], one interesting comment, there was a house up on Woodbridge Avenue, the Spears [E. Holden Spear, business manager of the *New York World*], and they had a country home up there and they had a fire one day and at the time, they could get the horses put together to go give the alarm. The house burnt down. It wasn't till after [unclear] siren had died down, they realized they could have used the telephone they had just installed a few days before.**

R. Terwilliger: [laughs] Oh my goodness. Isn't that something?

P. Fenton: **So when you–you had a question?**

M. Jessen: Yeah, Percy Craig's farm, didn't he have a grocery store down on the corner there?

P. Fenton: **That's right. McAdams.**

M. Jessen: On Danford's Corner.

P. Fenton: **Danford's Corner, and their relatives are around today and they recently won [unclear] with [unclear]. And they used to be John Robinson. These particular stores, merchants had [unclear] based over a couple of generations. In other words, being in a marriage by long period of time, Dan La Forge, who was very well-known [grocer] and apparently built up terrific rapport with the people in the town. So as I say, when you are talking in terms of less than 2,000 people between here and, I mean, in the area.**

M. Jessen: Well, they all gave credit too. That was–

P. Fenton: **That's something else. And of course, that was the bane of the existence of the small stores. I mean and then of course, when the paid store, when the chains came in, after they were blackballed by some fellow who'd gave them all the credit in the world, then instead of go ahead and priming the pump by giving him some more business, they'd go to the cash stores. And that sounded the death knell of the local stores.**

M. Jessen: You mentioned the American Store, that became the Acme Market Plant.

P. Fenton: **Yes, they changed the style. Much the way you see today; you see Pathmark [grocery chain store] and ShopRite [grocery chain store] there. They have different names at different times; I don't know what there.**

R. Terwilliger: Now who was the local druggist then?

P. Fenton: **The local druggist was primarily a man by the name of Hahm. George Hahm [at 412 Main Street]. Hahm and [Edward] Allen Burroughs [Jr.; Metuchen Pharmacy at 396 Main Street]. There were two.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, Mr. Burroughs, right.

[19] Paul Fenton wrote the church history titled *A History of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Metuchen, N.J., 1868-1968.*

P. Fenton: **And not only did they have drug business sewed up, but they had ice cream. And they had ice cream counters and–**

R. Terwilliger: Soda shops?

M. Jessen: Soda fountain, they call it.

P. Fenton: **And I know once I had experienced [alarm clock ringing] with a [unclear] and that was, really didn't know if I want to get out and get a soda. And it turns out that I thought it was a good idea. They went down there and I was a little suspicious as I was drinking it. But it seems that she called out and told him, "Fix it up, fix up the [unclear]." [laughter]**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's great!

P. Fenton: **So that was before the cooperation between the vender and the vendee.**

R. Terwilliger: [laughs] That's great.

M. Jessen: How about banks? What did the banks do?

P. Fenton: **Well, the oldest financial institution in the Borough of Metuchen and Edison County as we knew it would be the Savings and Loan Association, and it's in the Metuchen National Bank existed almost convincingly with it. But it was a difference in the savings from the Metuchen National Bank had a legal bath at the time of the Depression and they weren't able to open. And of course, that changed the whole style, traffic. I mean changed the style and they lost whatever seniority they could have had, which had been purely conjectural. I think the Savings and Loan, which went back to 1897, I think, [unclear] dates them a banking institution. Most of the banking was done by the people, association of the community, with some people traded in New Brunswick, some people traded in Perth Amboy, not so many in Plainfield.**

R. Terwilliger: Can you mention some names of the original founders of Metuchen Savings and Loan?

P. Fenton: **Yes, I have a list of that. Sometime I could–**

R. Terwilliger: Uh-huh. You don't remember offhand any of the original people?

P. Fenton: **Oh, I know a few, yeah. If you got a piece of paper I'd know immediately because I had on occasions–**

M. Jessen: It was Milton Mook.

P. Fenton: **Milton Mook. One of the original founders of this [was] Alexander Litterst, whose daughters [Louise and Elizabeth Litterst] are still active in the community.**

R. Terwilliger: Right, yes.

P. Fenton: **Well, there were other names. There was a Whitman family. A man by the name of [John Monroe] Whitman, whose brother [Charles Seymour Whitman] was the governor of New York, he lived up in what was known as the Towers [estate formerly located at 111 Lake Avenue].**

M. Jessen: That was across from the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association at 65 High Street]. It burned down a couple years ago.

P. Fenton: **I think it burned down, yeah.**

M. Jessen: And that's where Whitman Avenue comes from.

P. Fenton: **Whitman Avenue. And then they had another little cul-de-sac they've described as Poets Lane. Now I don't know if they're thinking of Poets Lane, but the man who–but the little street is not named after poet. The street is named after John Whitman, who developed the particular section. And there are other–be interesting to know who was on the board because those names were very well-known in town. I just know two or three of them.**

M. Jessen: Strong[20] was in it too.

P. Fenton: **Yeah.**

R. Terwilliger: Can we move on now to the fact that you went to Princeton [University]. Your father went to Princeton and also your oldest son [Paul Fieldhouse Fenton Jr.] you had mentioned to me.

P. Fenton: **That's right. The last two were caught with the war when I was–**

R. Terwilliger: The last two years at Princeton?

P. Fenton: **Well no, it was before that. I was picked up [unclear] as a freshman. I enjoyed the Navy; my son, he went to the Marine Corps just offsite. He had about a year, two years before he got picked up, before he enlisted in the Marines.**

R. Terwilliger: But you joined the Navy? This was after the war had started? World War I?

P. Fenton: **Yeah.**

R. Terwilliger: And you joined the Navy. Tell us a little bit about that. [laughs]

P. Fenton: **That was a big yachting party of 1918.**

R. Terwilliger: I mean what was your assignment? Where did you join? And where did you finally leave this country from? New York probably.

P. Fenton: **I mean the whole thing was only a matter of a few months. But boy, you can't measure the timing of the–although it's strange because sometimes when you get the most orderly transition, you go down byways. I went down with two fellows from college to join the Marine Corps, to join the Navy. And one of them was**

[20] He may be referring to Thomas W. Strong, who developed Woodwild Park.

subsequently the county engineer, Herb Fleming, who recently died. And the other one was William Rice Bassett from California–I mean from Colorado–Rice Bassett[21] never came back. He finally got bored down there in Norfolk [Virginia] or whatever when he was going through boot camp and he made a mistake; they all made the mistake of volunteering for something, and of course he ended up as a submarine enlister down there in the village picking up on some old merchant ship. And of course, they got the ship and of course, he was the first one to go. Herb Fleming got hung up with some heavy artillery. See the heavy artillery was manned by the Navy crews. And he got up there with Bremerton [Naval Station in Washington], and from Bremerton, way up there to Siberia [Russia].

M. Jessen: The Archangel [port city just below the Arctic Circle]?

P. Fenton: Yeah, he didn't get back there until about six months after war. And I was the easiest one of the bunch; I got into the OC [Officer Training] Community Training School after a while, and of course I just faded out and faded in. But my son, of course, he didn't leave the country either, which is a good thing because Mrs. Fenton, my mother-in-law, had two sons: one was in [the Battle of] Belleau Wood in World War I and the second one was shot down in the Po Valley in World War II. So you don't want too many of that in one family.

R. Terwilliger: No, right. Well, I'm glad you were that fortunate.

P. Fenton: That was a big yachting party of 1918. [laughter] I remember they had submarines; they had a mosquito feed, I guess they call them. But nevertheless, it did and the thing it didn't affect the way of life of the boys in there because they all came back and to a great degree finished the–because they're not on schedule. Well, most on schedule, but in the Navy in the second case, they had a bunch of 1941. Those boys didn't always get back or even come back and reflect the casualties of my son's class were very heavy. Because they were all a pile of Johnny Wyam's [phonetic] son and the fellow who was in the–his father was ambassador–all those, one after another and they were ways that this one, right smack in the Air Force, before they were trained, they got picked off. But when they came back, they'd outgrown the whole idea so really not too many of them went back to their homes. My son [Paul Fieldhouse Fenton Jr.] went to–he didn't back to Perth Amboy. He came out sometime like December something and he couldn't get–so he went to McGill [University] and took the master's degree and he then went on to Yale [University] for his academic.

R. Terwilliger: Right. Now how about yourself? You come back out of the Navy and is that about the time that you and Mrs. [Elizabeth (Ennis)] Fenton were married?

P. Fenton: That's right.

R. Terwilliger: Um-hm. And she was a local girl? Can we talk about her a little bit?

P. Fenton: Well let's see, I don't talk about anybody in the family; I mean [unclear]. [laughter] But appropriate in the sense that I can say this, that Mrs. Fenton was a local girl

[21] The Rice Bassett War Memorial Scholarship was found in 1920 by Princeton University to commemorate Quartermaster Rice Bassett (Class of 1920), who was killed on foreign water during World War I on October 9, 1918.

and I met her during college. So she left college to be married, spoke to a fellow, and she says he wasn't–he said, "You'll never get her to do something about her work." And she said, "Well, I don't expect to take an exam, so it makes users permits." [laughter] She said, "I'm getting married, so check the [unclear] payment in the flyer." [laughter] And it was a great deal when we were younger. I think that was quite a pattern in those days, boys would get married fairly quickly. They didn't shop around as they do today apparently, which is a good thing because you get your shopping done early. [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: And you told me that this was the house [at 368 Middlesex Avenue] that you came to as a young couple. I don't know whether it was when you first–

P. Fenton: Well, not as those were [unclear]. I didn't live in Metuchen continuously. This house was built between 1905 and 1910, I guess.

R. Terwilliger: It's beautiful home.

P. Fenton: The one next to it was down on William Street, this house, Mrs. Baumann [phonetic], Ken Baumann's [phonetic] wife, was born in this house next door. They moved it from William Street up Middlesex Avenue, plunked it down over here. In those days, instead of moving, you took the house with you. It was easier to do it. You just slide it along on those big [unclear] poles, those sliders, and a little help with kind of–how you describe that block and tackle? What would you call those?

M. Jessen: Well, that was it. You use a block and tackle and a horse to pull.

P. Fenton: Yeah, like they use to excavate with a big scoop.

M. Jessen: Yeah, slip scoop.

P. Fenton: Yeah, that's it. Well anyway, I went for the AT&T [American Telephone & Telegraph] with the New Jersey company–I mean the Bell Pennsylvania. We lived in Pennsylvania in Norristown and Media. Media, we lived right in the section where that Jasper Deeter had that Hedgerow Theater House where they had one of the first summer stock theaters. It was very nice to witness Swarthmore [Pennsylvania] and that area.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes. Yeah.

P. Fenton: So we enjoyed that for five years, but I took a leave of absence and went to Penn [University of Pennsylvania] trying with an idea of college teaching and I was in the school of law. And of course, they had Depression back in those days too. It wasn't the big one either, it was one of those minor recessions. And in those days, the lawyers were the poorest paid. Yeah, everyone went into the college teaching and a lawyer, you wish you knew–you feel a lawyer could always be a lawyer. But lawyers were probably the poorest-paid people in the country at that time. But they went from schoolteacher- to lawyer-type of money, up into big time so fast. It wasn't until recently, they really got into it. But I didn't.

So I took a leave of absence and then I went to Columbia [University] for some law. And then I was over in Europe in 1929 when the boom crash came. My father-in-law

was in the insurance business gave me a limitation, which was nicely followed up by the people over there to hear some admiralty appeals in the House of Lords [United Kingdom]. So anyway, [unclear] say, "When you going to call that a Depression over there, you know?" They knew it was coming, and of course, I finally said, "What's your formula?" And the formula was credit. Here they were, you know going around saying, "Spend! Spend! Spend!" at a time when they should have been doing just the opposite. Because I came back on the [unclear], I went down to the see the money–I was living on the inflated stocks in those days; you know you had this, you go out to lunch and the fellow who everybody buys the stock, the fellow with the quickest turnover, he footed the bill. [chuckling] But here were these crazy formulas on the board: fourteen dollars for Chrysler and something like Montgomery [unclear] with 400. They came on the board, I said, "Do you know what this–?" I was looking out at some fellow, "Hey, what are looking at those figures for?" I said, "Of course, he doesn't know how to read or write." Just inconceivable although it wasn't, that was the end of the line. So then I was in New York and I went down to dinner and one of my colleagues had come down, we were general managers in New York, you see, "Gee, we could use you." And so I figured that I knew more than he did because they didn't know the Depression was coming over there. So I got back in the fold very nicely and went into a different category.

M. Jessen: Was it Bell Telephone?

P. Fenton: Yeah. Well, it was AT&T. That's right. But I was in the publicity operations and my contacts were entirely with the broadcasting. And I didn't have any lobbying work, that was done up in Albany [New York] with the people. But they had Governor Callen's [phonetic] press, rather interesting group of people, the answering bureaus, I didn't realize what the answering bureau business does and the ramifications and the things that don't lend themselves to discussion particularly. Anyway, that's not to keep you busy.

R. Terwilliger: Now at this time, are you living in Metuchen? Are you living in this house?

P. Fenton: I think my family had left here. By that time, I came back because this house would have belonged to one of [unclear] in the house that Miss Riggs [phonetic] was in. So this house was available. This house and another–Bob Mook [Robert Kent Mook] subsequently took up a whole gather of them. So I just fell in the ways; I never particularly planned to be a commuter, but once you get used to it. But my mistake was that I ended up with a slew full of politics and poverty because I really got jammed up because Phineas Jones, who was a lovely fellow, he was a [Metuchen] mayor but he was beginning to get out of town. Wes Benner [Wesley Benner], who was the attorney, who wasn't actually living out of town, and they were getting rather remote. But anyway, so he appointed me overseer of the poor, which is just as beautiful what he did, put you in touch with everything that's going bad or down. [chuckling] And from that, I went into the full scale of it.

R. Terwilliger: You were a councilman in Metuchen, weren't you?

P. Fenton: Yes. In other words, being in the train of the law and being trained basically in teaching, you had a rather ambivalent attitude about politics. You didn't become professional or tied up in anything. You didn't get committed.

R. Terwilliger: What were politics like?

P. Fenton: **Well, for instance, at that bunch up in Columbia [University], that Lindsay Rogers and [Howard Lee] McBain, all those fellows, one would be Bernard Baruch [American financier], a lot of very–there were issues at that time. In other words, there was no question what their feet were dragging in terms of attacking it. And so as a consequence, before I moved, I let myself get lulled into staying on and running for councilman [unclear].**

R. Terwilliger: What were local politics like? What were issues–what were considered issues then?

P. Fenton: **Well first of all, you had all these spurious issues that usually make more noise than the real ones. But the whole thing was unemployment and mostly the debt. You see they had borrowed money, borrowed everything there. Everything was "raise the limit" and everybody was doing it. And the result was that these fellows were buying tax title liens and they were buying the town for the outstanding taxes and the taxes couldn't be paid. You had foreclosures coming through. So there were people who wanted to turn in quick claim deeds; they just simply jettisoned everything they had. They had what they call a reconstruction finance corporation, and those were a little too ambiguous and it was too late to play that game. I feel like taking a $40,000 maximum on a deposit and say that's it, and you should have never, you should have done it the wrong way. You should have done something different, you know. So in other words, I guess it was wrong.**

R. Terwilliger: Do you feel at this time and when people's properties were being foreclosed that a little bit of the atmosphere in Metuchen changed? Were there a lot of outside people that came in and bought up on this foreclosed property?

P. Fenton: **No, there wasn't too much of that. In the first place, as a general rule, I don't know if a community has had a better experience in either party than Metuchen. I mean basically, even the fact that it's been turned over in change, it has always been beneficial. This town in the old days when [President] Woodrow Wilson carried Metuchen for instance, and [President] Theodore Roosevelt would carry it again some other time or they were completely free of any–but this Depression business was something else again and they had–all of us, there was a group of people apparently, this New Deal crowd of course were nothing more than these fellows like [Winston] Churchill, who were basically became Tories [British political party]. We wanted everybody to have money so they could keep theirs, in other words, the idea was. That's why you find the very rich sometimes can take the attitude because they didn't get it the hard way sometimes. But they were a bunch of people there, for instance. Though as a consequence, I was a Red Cross chairman, I was on the council in the department which I was with the Corps. I was the director of the emergency relief and that was–and the fellow who was in New Jersey was Barnerd [phonetic], he was president of the telephone company, and of course that was how I got into that. And then there was Lew Compton [Lewis Compton], who was a fellow in town here, he was assistant secretary of the Navy and a very dedicated guy because his wife [Beatrice Compton] was one of my wife's best friends. She is still a good-looking woman too. [chuckling] Did you know her?**

M. Jessen: I went to school with his daughter, Camille.

P. Fenton: **Camille, oh yeah. Well, Camille, yeah, sure. She's had a tough time too, I mean, with sickness and things like that. But another one was Governor–**

M. Jessen: [George S.] Silzer?

P. Fenton: **No, Edison. Yeah, Charlie Edison [Charles Edison], governor [from 1941-1944].**

M. Jessen: Tom Edison's son.

P. Fenton: **Son, yeah. So he was very much interested. So those people, you get this crowd up there, Engelhard, it's that family, that Charlie Engelhard [Charles Engelhard] from Alexander [phonetic] up there in that–so all those people apparently represented were pretty–and of course that changed the political complications, but it certainly wasn't as big–because I go out here in the morning with the Pied Piper hollowing; I'd go down there and they'd be out sitting on the front porch here.**

R. Terwilliger: These are poor people that needed help?

P. Fenton: **Yeah, but the tragedy was they hadn't been poor people.**

R. Terwilliger: No. This is what I want you to tell us about.

P. Fenton: **Apparently, the people who were mostly affected were not first-generation Americans so the ones who had been used to being laid off. These were the fellows who had been general sales managers. They were really–because that was a little discouraging because it was rather frustrating to get around and hear those people make fun of boondoggling. The reason the boondoggling was the poor guys couldn't get anything else but bees [unclear] in writing then there's–**

M. Jessen: It is a lot of the middle class.

P. Fenton: **Yeah. The white-collar people were the ones that really got burned. I don't blame them; I know how I'd feel if they ever decided had the [unclear] pulled out from under them.**

R. Terwilliger: And what was your position in this then? What were you supposed to try to do for these people?

P. Fenton: **I was the only guy between them and getting money from the–but there were good things that came out of it, out of the hard way. [siren in background] First of all, instead of the contractors like [unclear] Pfeiffer [phonetic] handling roads, the Governor took it over, and it worked out all right because they went back to it. That's the best tasking thing whether it's good or bad sometimes. The other thing is you got this Roosevelt Park. I mean I was on the committee because I was–**

R. Terwilliger: Was that the WPA [Works Progress Administration] then?

P. Fenton: **Yeah, that was the one that made to the order; we bought that for the price of a ranch house, the out-pocket expense. The expense was practically negligible. Could have been done twenty years ago just as well. And then they built that Roosevelt**

Hospital, and that was done. And the library [Metuchen Public Library], that library as it existed until they put this addition on, was built for $75,000.

R. Terwilliger: Oh my gosh.

P. Fenton: But in other words, that was–just seems though everything I got pushed into was controversial. And the library vocation, there was only one vote on that library board which kept us from being … [recording ends]

[END OF INTERVIEW]