RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN C. RAGONE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Mr. John C. Ragone on November 2, 1994 at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Kurt Piehler and

Jennifer Grigas: Jennifer Grigas.

KP: I guess I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your parents and your community. Your father came from Italy?

John Ragone: Right.

KP: And do you know what time he came over to the United States?

JR: ... Well it had to be ... 1913-14. I'm not really sure. I mean, [I] can figure back. You know, I was born in 1918. My older brother was born 1916 and so it was probably 14 thereabouts.

KP: Do you know why he came to the United States?

JR: I have no idea. Absolutely none. Other than most of them came over because things in Italy, weren't you, know just right and no work probably and they came over for that holy grail.

KP: Do you know if your father expected to stay in the United States permanently?

JR: I would think so. He ... came over with his brother, the two of them were barbers and they opened up a barber shop in Philadelphia. And, of course, he met my mother and they got married in Philadelphia. ... Now, she was born here. But, basically like, you know, all the immigrants that came over that's the way they did it. Of course, ... he wasn't around too long. ... He died when he was 34. I was eleven so it was ... quite different too, you talk about single parents, my mother was one of the originals, you know.

KP: Was it hard for your mother?

JR: Oh sure, definitely because, you know, let's face it, Depression, right? And we were in high school during the Depression. We went to college during the Depression and you know there were two brothers and a sister and three boys. ... [We] all got college degrees which was pretty good [coming] from an immigrant family.

KP: And your mother worked for Campbell Soup?

JR: She worked for Campbell Soup.

KP: And so she would work the day shift?

JR: She worked days and you know, ... I mean, we did it. There was always somebody around not that we were left alone. There was always somebody else in the house with us, either another relative or grandparents or whatever so we ... had the coverage, we had the protection, and we appreciated it.

KP: You did not see a lot of your mother often during the week?

JR: Oh, ... well sure, everyday. Yeah.

KP: Yeah.

JR: Naturally, yeah. ... A typical Italian home, if you know what I mean.

JG: I have questions about the Depression. How did the Depression specifically affect your family?

JR: Well, I mean ... there wasn't much. I mean, ... we always had food on the table, okay, and there was always somebody working. In other words, my mother was working and there was always ... someone working and ... really, it was ... kind of tough. We all had odd jobs, you know, to try to make a ... penny, whatever it was. In fact, when I started working, when I graduated from high school and I worked at Campbell Soup Company, where my mother ... was working, I was working for ten dollars a week. Ten dollars a week! You pay that much in a tip now when you go to restaurant. [laughter] So ... we got by, you know, it was tough, but it was tough for everybody. At least we had a home, we had ... a parent, we had food on the table, we had clothing and we had a good education. So what ... more could we ask for?

JG: Did you or any of your siblings work during high school? Because I know you said something about odd jobs?

JR: No, ... we didn't work, other than ... cutting grass for neighbors, little things, but not ... full-time jobs. ... Our mother believed in us getting an education and concentrating on getting in and also participating in athletics, which like I told you a little while ago, I'm still running. I ran in high school and I'm still running. I'm 76 years old. [laughter] ...

JG: What kinds of sports were you involved with in high school?

JR: Track and football basically. That was about it. I was always the little guy in high school so I

was probably the smallest one of them when I was a sophomore and when I graduated I was one of the regulars. So I went from 5' 2" to 5' 11" in three years. [laughter]

KP: You grew up in Philadelphia and Camden?

JR: Well, I was ... born in Philadelphia, but I only spent six months of my life there. And then we moved to Camden for four years and then we moved to the suburbs because my father, he believed in living out in the ... country. So, we moved to a town called Oaklyn. That was our hometown and I went to grammar school there and one year of high school at Collingswood. And then we moved back to the grandparents in Camden because you were asking me about, "Well, how did you do it with your mother working?" Well the reason we moved back to our grandparents was so that my mother could work. So, we lived with our grandparents and uncle or aunt, whoever happened to be still living in the house at the time. And then I graduated from high school in '35 and worked at Campbells for three years while my brother graduated from Rutgers. So then I came to Rutgers in '38 and graduated in '42.

KP: You lived in Oaklyn for a while.

JR: Oh yeah.

KP: What kind of community was it like when you were growing up?

JR: The typical apple pie, you know what I mean? [laughter] Nice suburban town, a lot of green grass and trees and everyone on the block knew everyone, very friendly. ... Just a small town, one theater, one ... butcher shop and so forth. It was a nice little town.... A great place to ... be a kid.

KP: Were there many other Italian families in your neighborhood?

JR: ... No. ... Not on our block, you know. No. No. We were probably one of the ... first, but we were ... very accepted. Of course, I was too young to know any different, if you know what I mean. [laughter]

KP: Yeah.

JR: I mean, we didn't know we were Italian if you get the point. [laughter]

KP: Were there many Catholics in Oaklyn or was it mainly Protestant?

JR: Well, there weren't .... enough to have their own church. It wasn't until years later that they ... had a Catholic Church in Oaklyn but, no not ... when I was younger.

KP: My father, growing up in of all places Hudson County saw some Klan activities as a small child. Did you remember any Klan activity in Camden County?

JR: No.

KP: Growing up?

JR: No. Not until we moved to Camden.

KP: Oh really. What happened?

JR: When we got back to Camden then ... it was different. Then we were living in a ... basically Italian neighborhood and just like every ... city has a neighborhood, Camden had the Italian neighborhood, they had the Polish neighborhood, they had the Jewish neighborhood, and ... we were in the Italian neighborhood. It ... was a very cohesive town as far as the Italians are concerned, they had their church, they had their own social activities and I tell you it was a great place to be a kid. I mean, it's unfortunate like Newark and Jersey City, Camden has gone down the drain, but ... when I was a kid, hey there was nothing wrong with growing up in Camden.

KP: Did you know Russ Janoff at the time?

JR: Yes, we went to the same high school and we were ... very close. In fact, I saw him a couple years ago at the reunion. So, yep. ... See, now Russ was in the other side of town, ... which ... we always thought of as the better part of Camden. Yeah, more trees, better homes. [laughter]

KP: How interesting because he still says it was not that wealthy of a neighborhood, but ...

JR: Well, everything's relative, right?

KP: Yeah, yeah. Where did most people in your community of Oaklyn and Camden work? Was your father, for example ...

JR: You see my father, he ... had his own barber shop on the waterfront of Philadelphia and he just rode the bus everyday to Philadelphia.

KP: So even when you moved out of Camden, even when you moved out to Oaklyn he still commuted into Camden?

JR: ... He commuted to Philadelphia.

KP: Philadelphia.

JR: Right. He did that. Right, exactly.

KP: When you were in Oaklyn did your father keep a garden?

JR: Yes. He had a garden and he had his fig tree and he was very handy. ... To tell you the truth, when I think back, I don't know how he did it, because, you know, the barber shops would be open [at] six-seven o'clock in the morning and they'd be open until eight ... o'clock at night and I can still see myself sitting in the picture window, looking out, waiting for that bus to come up to

the corner so he can get out of that bus. And it was a long day. I don't know how he did it. Maybe that's why he had such a short life.

KP: How many days a week did he work? Six?

JR: Six days a week.

KP: So he only had Sunday...

JR: Sundays, but Sundays we were a family. ... He had his victrola and he had his records, Caruso and all his operas and ... that's how we got actually introduced to music through him. ... Because, [he was a] typical ... Italian opera lover.

KP: Your mother worked for Campbells Soup. Was it unionized at the time she worked?

JR: Was it what?

KP: Unionized. Did you have a union?

JR: Not when she started. ... That didn't come until, I'd say maybe in the early '40s and ... then, of course, when it did become unionized it was ... quite a ... shock to a lot of them because, ... you know, the way they went about it. But Campbells was one of the lucky companies. They ... had a pretty good relationship with their ... unions. I ... can't recall in ... the history of ... Campbells having any real problems. They may have had a strike, I don't know, but I can't recall, not in my time.

KP: When your mother worked how many hours would she work a week? What were her shifts like?

JR: ... They usually worked about 40 hours a week.

KP: Was she able to get pretty steady work during the time she was working with Campbell?

JR: She was number one on her ... job. She scraped carrots. That's all she did was scrape carrots. She probably scraped enough carrots to go from here around the world ten times. She was one of the best carrot scrapers. That's why she had such strong hands.

KP: So she was able to have fairly steady work?

JR: Oh yes, she worked right up until her retirement. And she was one of the last to retire and had a good retirement and she lived until she was 90, so that wasn't too bad. I should do so good. I should do so good right Jennifer? [laughter] We should do so great.

KP: You ended up working for Campbells Soup?

JR: Yeah, ... exactly. I also worked there summers, you know, in high school during the "tomato

season" when the farmers would come up with their trucks, you know. Of course, that's all automation now.

KP: I remember people have said that when it was tomato season you could smell tomato in the air.

JR: Oh, all over the city, exactly. And Camden was RCA Victor and Campbells Soup. That was ... the town, plus Walt Whitman. [laughter]

KP: You initially went to Campbells Soup. Did you know you were going to college and this was just a temporary job?

JR: No, I didn't know. ... Of course, ... when you're in high school you think about it, but here ... it was the middle of the Depression, my brother was in ... college and I was, you know, helping to send him money every week ... out of my ten dollars a week salary and I would pay five dollars a week board. So, ... we helped him. But then, I ... just knew that I wasn't going to be packing cans all my life. Picking up eight cans putting them in a basket, just doing that, you know, for a half hour and then switch a half hour, that wasn't for me. And of the ... four fellows on our team, three of us went to Rutgers. And we just vowed we were gonna get out of the sweat hole and in my case, which I was waiting until my brother graduated. ... So, I came up here and I got a 200 dollar scholarship from Camden County and arrived here on a Sunday night and by five o'clock Sunday, I had myself a job waiting on tables at Stollman's restaurant. That was one of five jobs I held while I was an undergraduate. So.

KP: You also joined the National Guard?

JR: Right. I joined the National Guard before I came to Rutgers. That was a little ... subterfuge. They came to me, a member of the National Guard came to me, and said that they were going to summer camp at Sea Girt and every year at the end of the camp they have a track meet and it was very, very competitive, one company against another company and would I be willing to go into the National Guard for two weeks to run for the medical detachment. [laughter] So, ah sure two weeks vacation, okay. So I ... enlisted in the National Guard and they assured me that in two weeks, I'd get out. So I went and I competed in the track meet and I won ... my race, and I threw the shotput and won that, and I enjoyed it very much so. I had no duties. All I had to do was that and at night we were able to go to Asbury Park [and] do what we want. But at the end of two weeks they said, "You want to disenroll? You want to get out? It's up to you." I said, "I like the guys. I'll ... stay in it for awhile." So I stayed in it for a year and then when I enrolled at Rutgers I couldn't see going to the National Guard once a week, so they, ... let me out. They just had some reason for getting me out. I don't know what, ... left the state or something, I don't know what it was, but it wasn't true. [laughter] All I know is I got out, but I enjoyed it. It was a great experience before the war. That was prior to '38.

KP: No. What was it? You went to weekly training then.

JR: Weekly training. Every week, once a week for two hours.

KP: Where would your training be?

JR: Where?

KP: Yeah, where?

JR: At the National Guard Armory in Camden.

KP: In Camden.

JR: They had one in New Brunswick so I could have transferred, but I knew I was going to be in ROTC, so I figured ROTC would be enough because that would be once a week too plus classes.

KP: If you had stayed in National Guard you may have very well have been in the war, even earlier.

JR: Oh, no doubt. I would have been called up, ... you know, when they called up the National Guard.

KP: Did people who joined the National Guard or were in the National Guard in 1937 and 1938 think that a war was coming?

JR: No. No, because, you know, we were ... in the ... early Roosevelt years and the ... talk then was, you know, stay out of the war. You know, that's their problem not our problem. But, of course, now when I read back on it. ...

KP: It looks obvious.

JR: FDR was trying to get in it, all the time. [laughter].

KP: What did you and your family think of FDR?

JR: Well, he ... did the right thing at the right time. He was a savior. Unfortunately, my mother was not a ... Democrat. She was a Republican committee woman, ... but still it was a Democratic household even though she worked for the ... Republican committee. But, no he was ... accepted. In fact, there was probably one of ... the thrills of my life when I saw FDR in person, when he came to Camden during one of his campaigns.

KP: He spoke in the downtown.

JR: Spoke downtown in front of the City Hall. And, it was a typical sea of people as far as the eye can see. And he was just like in his movies. He was there in his convertible, you know, sitting in the back and so forth. Oh, no, we ... loved FDR. We really did.

KP: You mentioned your mother was a committee woman.

JR: Right.

KP: How did that come about? Is there a story there?

JR: I have no idea. She just went around and got the other Italian people to vote for whoever she told them to vote for. You know what I mean? That's a committee woman.

KP: Yeah, but you don't know why?

JR: No, no idea. No idea. I was too young to know.

KP: How did your family and people in your neighborhood feel about Mussolini in the 1930s?

JR: They weren't too pleased. Weren't too pleased. Except for my ... uncle who thought he was the greatest and that was just one person. [laughter]

KP: But otherwise your family did not think much of him.

JR: No, no. They were ... "Americans". You know, what I mean? The typical American immigrant, the ... flag wavers, definitely flag wavers.

KP: Do you have any other questions about Camden?

JG: I was wondering, you said you waited to go to college because your brother was going to college.

JR: Right.

JG: What made you and your brother decide to attend Rutgers?

JR: Well, good school. It gave us a chance to get away from home. Typical college life. ... I really can't, well ... in my case, I went because my brother went. Now why my brother picked Rutgers, I have no idea. I just don't know, but with me, it was just I would come up while he was here on visits. And he belonged to Beta Theta Pi fraternity so I would come up and stay at the Beta house and I went to the-- it seems strange, but because I had a job I was able to afford a tuxedo, so I bought a tuxedo, and I would come up and go to all ... the dances at Rutgers. [laughter] ... So, I ... enjoyed that.

KP: You knew much about Rutgers even before you entered.

JR: I enjoyed that part of it. ... And, then of course, ... when he was a senior, ... I brought ... my present wife up to the ... dances. So, it was ... nice. It was enjoyable. Okay?

KP: Before going to Rutgers you were in the National Guard. Who was in the National Guard when you were in there? Were they older? Were they World War I veterans? What was the average age of people at the armory in Camden?

JR: Well actually most of them were older than I was. ... Let's see, I enrolled in 1937. So, ... I was nineteen at the time. And most of them were in there 20s. I was ... actually one of the younger ones in there and ... there were mostly, I would have to say that ... I wouldn't be surprised that quite a few of them were in there because of the money they got for ... serving in the National Guard. I mean, even it was, I don't even know how much we got, a dollar month or whatever it was, but it was money.

KP: Yes.

JR: You know, what I mean? And, ... of course, it was a place to go to keep warm on a cold winter night ... when you're drilling. [laughter]

KP: And also it seemed that Sea Girt was a pleasant town?

JR: Oh, Sea Girt was a fantastic vacation, especially if you were in the medical detachment. I don't know about the other guys, but ... we lived in a tent for two weeks and it was enjoyable. ... I liked it. I liked it. That's why I stayed in.

KP: You came to Rutgers and your brother was already here.

JR: No. He graduated in '38 and I enrolled in September of '38.

KP: And what did you think you would major in when you came here?

JR: Education. Because I was always interested in being a ... physical ed. teacher.

KP: From high school on?

JR: From ... when I was in high school. I always enjoyed athletics and ... specifically running track. So, that was ... my objective. ... I always said, that if I ... got a scholarship I would want to be a sanitary engineer. If I didn't get a scholarship and I had to work my way through, I wanted to be a physical ed. teacher. And that's how it turned out. [laughter]

KP: Had you applied for a scholarship for engineering?

JR: No, no. ... There weren't too many scholarships available in those days. In fact, the day I enrolled I took a loan from the dean. He had his own private fund.

KP: This was Dean Metzger?

JR: Dean Metzger. Fantastic. I never even got to pay that off until ... the year after I graduated. ...

It was tougher being a student at Rutgers financially than it was when I was working for ten dollars a week. Because I was holding down five jobs while I was a student, ... you know, waiting on tables for three meals a day plus all other things that I did while I was a student, selling programs at the football games, selling corsages for the proms, selling books at night. I ... travelled all over this area ... selling books to people in all these towns. No car, took buses. And I worked at the athletic office so many hours. National, what did they call it? National Youth Administration.

KP: National Youth Administration.

JR: I did that. So I had my share of work. And, of course, my senior year I had a full-time teaching job.

KP: How many hours did you work about?

JR: Well, we ... were only allowed to work, ... you were offered I think, so many hours a month. I'm not sure what it was, but it wasn't ... too much. ... But, ... it helped. And it ... helped me, too, because I was working with George Little, who was one of the most fantastic directors of athletics. And he built ... the new Rutgers stadium.

KP: Yes.

JR: ... And he would take us over there, you know, whenever [they were] building it and so forth and so on as part of our administration classes. ... In fact, one of my thrills was attending the dedication game. I missed the second dedication, but I was at [the] first dedication.

KP: What do you remember about the first dedication? Are there any memories of that? For most people of the Class of 1942 the dedication game was one of their distinctive memories.

JR: Well the ... big thing was that ... most people think that the dedication game is the first game played at the stadium and it wasn't. There was a game played a week before that against North Hampton and then there was the dedication, of course beating ... Princeton the first time in 69 years was just, that was the highlight. That was a real highlight and we never got over it and never will get over it. It was absolutely fantastic. It was a fantastic day. And for years I had the Princeton waterbucket. [laughter]

KP: What happened to it?

JR: [It was a] ... big black bucket with the ... orange "P" on it that was my souvenir ... of that game.

KP: Do you still have it?

JR: Oh, no! No way. [laughter] ... That went with the wind.

KP: You mentioned that George Little was a very good director of athletics.

JR: Terrific.

KP: What else do remember about him as a teacher?

JR: Well, he was a ... tremendous administrator and I think he came from the Big ... Ten Michigan. ... I believe, he came from Michigan. ... And I just learned so much working in ... the office with him and they gave me a lot of ... responsibilities. Do you know what they did? This is just absolutely amazing. You wouldn't believe this. On Monday ... afternoon, I would walk from the gym to the downtown bank with the Saturday's gate receipts and deposit it in the bank. Would you believe that? [laughter] Could you believe that they took a student, ... let a student go like that unprotected, walk through campus and deposit Saturday gate receipts. Today, that's unbelievable, but that's ... just something that has stood out in my mind ... that they had enough trust in me, and so forth and so on to let me do that. So, that was something that I'll never forget.

KP: How much would you be walking around with?

JR: How much?

KP: Yeah.

JR: Whatever the gate receipts were ... under my coat. Under my coat that's it.

KP: Would it be tens of thousands of dollars?

JR: Well, you know, whatever ... it was, ... I had no idea. I mean, I didn't look ... in the bag to see how much I had, but that was quite a feeling walking through campus with ... all the gate receipts. I don't know how many people knew that. In fact, there are probably ... no survivors around when I did that. Because Little is gone and Miss. Dewhearst is gone. She was his secretary. But, ... it was ... quite a ... nice place to work. You know who else worked there? Otto Hill.

KP: Yes, I have heard a lot about Otto Hill and Vinnie Utz.

JR: Oh, Vinnie, he was ... a gem. He was a gem. He was a typical college hero, you know. ... Well liked and tremendous wit and so forth and so on, but he was one of the war casualties, one of the casualties. Yep.

KP: How important was athletics to Rutgers in the late 1930s?

JR: Well, Rutgers wasn't big time athletics in those days, but it was important, it was part of the curriculum, part of a well rounded college education as far as I'm concerned. I mean, the ... campus then was different than it is today. I mean, like we had 1,200 students on campus. And, ... in fact, one thing that my ... wife has never forgotten, we were walking down College Avenue one evening and, ... I guess, it was snowing or the weather wasn't too great and this car stopped and the gentleman said, "Would you like, can I give you a ride to get you out of the weather?" It

was Dr. Clothier, the president of Rutgers. She never ever got over that. And that's typical small college, friendly atmosphere. You know, what I mean? And, I mean, I can't see Dr. Lawrence doing that today. [laughter] ... But, ... I would put what he did, I'd put athletics in the same class. Just friendly, you know, enjoy, enjoy.

KP: Where did you live when you were at Rutgers?

JR: I lived in a ... private home and we had the second floor of a ... private home. A Hungarian family. I can still smell the Hungarian food rising up through the rooms, you know, but it was nice. Typical. What'd ... we pay? Five dollars a month, I think. [laughter] Something like that.

KP: You did not want to live in your brother's fraternity or could you not afford to live there?

JR: No, I ... wouldn't be able to afford it. In fact, he ... lived in the basement of the dean's house. He couldn't afford to live in the fraternity [house]. And do you know who his roommate was? Dr. Pane, Remigio Pane, who became a famous Rutgers professor.

KP: Oh, yes.

JR: And he was the head of ... Italian studies. He came over here as an immigrant, went to school in Trenton, came to Rutgers, and he and my brother lived in the dean's basement. ... That's how they saved ... expenses. ... He went right to the top, college, teaching.

KP: You mentioned that you had a favorite professor, Professor Dochet.

JR: Well yes, he was ... physical education and he was, I would say, he was a role model. Came out of Springfield and physical ed. man, and Springfield was famous for physical education teaching and so forth. And he was also responsible for the ... student teaching program. So he would be the one who would come and observe while we were student teaching. And, ... to this day I ... can still see the letter he wrote when I tried to get in the navy. I tried to join the navy and when ... they came up with the PT boat program and they were looking for officers and so he was one of the fellows who wrote a terrific letter of recommendation. And ... I went up to New York and I applied ... to become an ensign in the navy, but I was too old. They turned me down.

KP: You were not that old.

JR: Well, like I told you I was three years older than the average person, but when I went up to enlist I was, well let me see, well, yeah, I was in my mid-twenties at the time. So I must have been about 26, I guess. I was too old. So, I never ... made it, so I went back to teaching. ... Then they changed the draft, they kept changing the draft. First, when I was a student at Rutgers, I was student deferred and then when they changed the draft again, I was a pre-Pearl Harbor father. So any ... child that was born nine months after Pearl Harbor was called a Pre-Pearl Harbor father so then I got deferred for that. Then they changed it again and they put me in 1-A. Well they put me in 1-A, the principal of the high school got excited and he wrote a letter to the draft board and said, "Oh, look, this man's too valuable. We need him in the high school to get the kids ready ...

to go in the service." Because, we had a ... real good program. We taught military marching to high school kids. We had an obstacle course. We had a tremendous program. In fact, I have letters from service men, you know, thanking us for the program we had.
So I got deferred for that for a while until ... after V-E day and then they changed it again. And now they started taking fathers, children, and so forth. That's when I went into maritime service. I was there for five weeks and they dropped the bomb. When they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima we knew something was up because, on the base, they ... got the whole base into the auditorium and they were gonna show us a movie, but we could hear noise, people hollering and yelling from the nearby cities. We were at Sheepshead Bay and then they finally told us what had happened and they said, "Just control yourselves. The war is going to be over and all fathers in this room will be disenrolled in three days." So three days later, I was out and I was supposed to start purser school on Monday. I was going to be an ensign in the ... merchant marine and I had qualified, took an exam and I [was] finally gonna get my commission. I was going to be a purser. ... So that went down too. So I was back. That was it. That was my military career, ... five weeks at Sheepshead Bay. [laughter] Never even got on a ship.

KP: You mentioned that you were student teaching your last year at Rutgers. Where did you do your student teaching?

JR: I did my student teaching at New Brunswick from October till Christmas. Then, ... of course, the second semester at Rutgers started. When the second semester started, ... you know, we had Pearl Harbor and so forth and so on. Then ... my supervising teacher was a former Rutgers grad who had a lieutenant's commission in the army reserves. So he got called up, immediately and whose going to take his place? Oh, let's get John Ragone. He was a student teacher. So they called the dean and said, "Could Mr. Ragone come over and substitute for Ed Blumberg because he got called active duty and so forth until we get someone else?" "Oh sure go ahead, go over. Two weeks." Well two weeks turned out to be a full-time job because everybody in the department left and I was ... it. I was the only one left. ... All the others left, one went in as a captain and MPs. Another went into the infantry. So the dean said, "Okay, go ahead, you can do it." And, of course, I got a tremendous, tremendous salary, fantastic salary of a 150 dollars a month, which was unbelievable. [laughter] So 1500 dollars a year, that was my starting salary.

KP: Which in the 1940's was ...

JR: Well it was, you know, 1942. Let's ... face it. And ... the ironical part about it is, because they paid me a 150 dollars they had to pay another teacher who was already working there getting less, more money because he was getting less than what I was getting and I was still a student at Rutgers. And, ... I also coached track that year, ... which we got paid extra. And that was my start of my coaching career. ... And then, of course, we graduated early because of the war. We graduated early in May. May 12th, I think it was. So that was ... my senior year. It was ... quite ... a year. And I was also working downtown at one of the haberdasheries. While I was teaching at Rutgers, I was working part-time Saturdays and nights down there. ... I was a hard working kid. [laughter]

KP: You were in ROTC for two years. Did you try to stay in for an additional two years?

JR: No. No, because I was married and I ... could foresee going to Camp Drum in the summer-time and so forth. So I never ... really wasn't interested in ... getting a commission like my brother did, but he ... did quite well getting a [commission]. He went ... in there a lieutenant. He ended up as the navigator for President Roosevelt when they went over to Casablanca. So he was written up quite well, you know, got a lot of publicity on that. That was his achievement I guess, ... shining light for him, was when he was President Roosevelt's navigator. ... [He] met Stalin and the whole bunch, you know, the whole bunch, Churchill. ...

KP: Did you see war coming in 1939-1940?

JR: Well, I ... kind of felt sooner or later that ... we'd get in. ... I didn't think it would start the way it did. ... I had another experience, too. ... During the summer, I worked ... for the Pennsylvania Reading Seashore Lines as a trainman. And I would have these runs between Camden and Atlantic City, Camden and Wildwood, and so forth on weekends. And I worked what was known as the extra list. But then during the war, I started getting calls to work troop trains. What an experience that was. We'd go over to a place called the zoo in Philadelphia where the ... train crew would change and we'd pick up the crew and take them to Fort Dix or to Trenton on their way to Hoboken and these GIs were sitting on those trains for three days in coach seats and knew they were going ... overseas into battle. And here's this young whippersnapper coming down in a ... trainman uniform. They're going to war and here he is collecting, counting heads. ... That was ... oh, that was a frightening experience. ... I had quite a few troop trains so that was as close as I got to going overseas was ... riding these troop trains. [laughter]

KP: They must have smelled terribly?

JR: Oh, three days. They were mean or miserable. They knew they were going into battle and ... they ... really weren't too happy you know and so forth. ... The only nice part about it was that we had a ... high officer with us while we were taking the count, you know, ... for the railroad so that whatever they said was on the train that's what they got paid for, so many troops. But, ... that was a real, ... I'll tell you it was a ... sad experience because you knew that some of these guys weren't gonna come back. You knew they were gonna be killed. You know, you look at these young kids and, oh especially this troop, this gang, that came in from Texas. ... You know, it was just enough to make you sick. ... That was the part that I did not enjoy. I did not like that, you know. That was ... a bad phase of it for me as far as I'm concerned.

KP: Did you ever talk to any of the people on the train?

JR: No way, because I felt ... guilty. I felt guilty because I wasn't sitting where they were. You know what I mean? But they didn't know I was a father. They didn't know I was draft deferred. You know? ... All they know is, "Hey! Why aren't you in uniform?"

KP: Did you ever feel in other places that you should have been in uniform even though you had tried to join the navy?

JR: No, ... because I felt that I ... was helping the war effort in ... getting the young guys ready to

go in service. ... And we ... did all our best to ... prepare them. And, at least ... when a fellow left New Brunswick High School he knew how to march, he knew what physical fitness was, and ... he knew ... about venereal disease. Because in those days we were way ahead of everybody. We taught sex education, too. So I felt that we were ... doing our part. And, you know, selling war bonds and so forth and having the kids participate in parades. And I ... can still remember this Hollywood star that came to New Brunswick and they had this big parade and she raised, I don't know, how many hundreds of thousands of dollars in war bonds. But that was ... what they did in those days. That was the big thing.

KP: You mentioned that your high school was way ahead in terms of teaching about sex education and venereal disease. When you say you were way ahead, what were other high schools doing?

JR: Well, because other schools ... weren't teaching it. I mean, I took a course at Rutgers. It was called, education for family living, so I was qualified to teach it, plus I was also a father at the time, okay? And in talking to the other people in the class who were also local teachers, they didn't have any sex education. It was unheard of. It was a word that they were afraid to talk about. But, ... we had it. We had it in New Brunswick from 1942 on. In fact, my supervising teacher also took the same class that I took, at the same time. So we were both taking it at the same time. Dr. (Lescher?), she was way ahead of her time, way ahead. She was generations ahead of her time.

KP: In what way?

JR: Well, in ... teaching teachers how to teach sex education.

KP: And she was a professor at ...

JR: At Rutgers.

KP: At Rutgers?

JR: Yeah.

KP: And so you really got the idea of teaching sex education because of Rutgers?

JR: Because of Rutgers. Exactly. Exactly.

KP: Before you instituted it in New Brunswick, was it new to New Brunswick to teach sex education?

JR: No, they didn't have it.

KP: They didn't have it. So you were the first really to teach it?

JR: We were the first ones. We introduced it.

KP: Did you get any resistance from anyone in the community?

JR: No, no.

KP: No ministers or no...

JR: No, because we didn't ... discuss birth control. You know, what I mean? We wouldn't do it. [laughter] ... We said, you know, ... it's a religious thing. So, I'm glad I don't have to handle it today. [laughter]

KP: What did you teach exactly? How much detail?

JR: Anatomy and physiology and social parts of it and so forth. And we had, you know, it was very interesting. ... We give every kid in the class, when we started, a piece of paper and say, "Ask any three questions you want to ask. Write them down, too embarrassed to ask them." And, ... you can make a chart. They want to know about masturbation. They want to know about pregnancy, you know. ... Times haven't changed. The same today as they were 50 years ago. They all want the same question. [laughter] ... We had a teacher there that would say, how did he put it, he said, "97 percent of the males masturbate. The other three percent are liars." [laughter] And, ... that was his pet, that was his pet. Well that had nothing to do with the war.

KP: But you did have Camp Kilmer. Camp Kilmer was very nearby.

JR: Oh yeah, yeah.

KP: What was it like to have such a big army camp so close?

JR: Well it changed ... the town because, you know, every ... night, every weekend, you had literally hundreds and thousands of GIs all over the town and ... I guess taking over the bars or what have you. And you had military police up and down the streets and so forth and so on. So it ... definitely changed the town. I guess, the town fathers would have more to say about any problems they may have had. I don't know of ...

KP: You never noticed any problems?

JR: I mean, ... it was nothing like we have today with drive by shootings or hijacking or murders or what have you. They were typical guys who were coming and going. They were either going to combat or coming back, whatever it was. It was one way or the other. But, yes, it ... changed things around because everything was basically geared towards Camp Kilmer. So I guess the Salvation Army and all the other organizations, they all had to change their philosophies and so forth ... because of the GIs. But, you know, it ... changed, it definitely changed.

KP: In teaching sex education, did you teach men and women separately?

JR: Oh, yeah.

KP: Was there any concern when you had so many GIs, concern about the women in high school and all of these soldiers?

JR: Nothing, nothing. ... There was no problem. ... Like I say, I don't know, whether they have any statistics at the police headquarters if anything happened with the police and the local girls, but it ... wasn't, if there was anything, it wasn't discussed.

KP: Yes. You did not know of any problems.

JR: It didn't make the Home News. [laughter]

KP: Later, I want to ask some more questions about New Brunswick and the war. You got married in college and ...

----------END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE----------

KP: Before the tape cut off, you were mentioning that you met your wife ...

JR: Yeah, I met my wife in ... March of 1938. And, of course, ... you know, ... we were in love for two years and we just, I can't think right now, you know, ... why, when, here and what not, but we decided to get married. So we got married in June of 1940 and I continued on at Rutgers. And then in my senior year we got an apartment, [a] one room apartment with kitchen privileges on George Street in New Brunswick. ... And, it was rough, but I ... wouldn't give it up, you know, for anything in the world. It was great, it was great. ... And, of course, we had our first of two sons which we're very happy. And as far as we're concerned, it worked out fine. We didn't get married to beat the draft, because we got married in 1938. [laughter] So, no, we got married in '40. I'm sorry, we got married in 1940.

KP: Had you thought of waiting it out until you graduated?

JR: No, no. We ... figured we were ready and why wait. So you know. ... I don't think it was a mistake. It could have been, but ... I guess it ... was probably unheard of at the time. ... I don't know of anyone else in the class ...

KP: That was married.

JR: ... That was married, but I found out later that there ... was someone else that got married. In fact, I think at the reunion they ... mentioned something about him getting married and going up to New York City or something and they had a two or three day honeymoon and that was it and then he had to go ... away to the service. So, I think he got married because he was going into the service. You might end up with someone.

JG: I was wondering you said you met your wife in 1938 and then you went off to school that fall. What was it like to have your girlfriend in Camden?

JR: It was rough, it was rough. [laughter] We were ... typical, you know, couple madly in love. And I came home weekends. Again, didn't have a car. I would hitch hike ... back to Camden after class on Saturday ... or after the football game just to ... go down. ... It was mostly every weekend, may ... not have been every weekend, but it was pretty close to it. So we saw each other as much as we could.

JG: Did she ever come up here?

JR: Oh yeah. She came up to the dances and stayed at the Beta house. ... But, even though my ... brother was long out of school, she ... still stayed at the Beta house. But, no, it was ... nice. It was enjoyable. We got ... to most of the proms. All the big time swing bands, you know, Gene Krupa and Russ Morgan and what have you. So they were great. They were great days. I have no regrets, no regrets. It was nice.

JG: Once you got married did she move up here or did she stay Camden?

JR: No, she continued working until my senior year. Then my senior year, when we decided to come up here and then she quit her job and we were up here together, up here.

JG: I do not know if you want to switch subjects, I do not know if you have anymore questions; But I was going to ask, you said you were really interested in athletics about what you were involved in athletics. What kind of athletic, not organizations, but clubs or anything were involved in at Rutgers?

JR: At Rutgers?

JG: Yeah.

JR: Well, unfortunately because I was holding down five jobs, I couldn't participate in athletics. I was out for freshman football for maybe a month or so, but suddenly I just ... ran out of time. So I had to give up freshman football. And, no I ... did not participate in Rutgers. Again, I ... felt that I was three years older than the average student and I had the responsibility of ... making money and I just couldn't take the time so while other guys were out on the track team or doing what they did, I was working. So, to me, my objective was to get a degree, but I became very active in coaching track once I started teaching and I stayed with it and I'm ... still involved with it. So, ... I coached track for 23 years and I was the Director of Athletics for 11 years and I also officiated track for 42 years and I officiated football and basketball. So I ...

JG: Did it all.

JR: ... Did it all. I did it all.

KP: Did you ever have any vision that you would like to be a professional athlete at some point in high school?

JR: No, no. I enjoyed working with high school kids too much to give any thought to that. I ... just enjoyed coaching. I enjoyed being with high school kids. ... Just ... taking a raw product, you know, and just developing that kid into becoming a champion, to me, was ... unbelievable. And I ... had a lot of success because I had a lot of good athletes. So, ... I have no regrets as far as going into coaching. Took a lot of time. I was away. I was away from my boys, you know, Saturdays and nights and what have you, ... but I ... enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

KP: You were preparing people for war during World War II. What were students like and how did they feel about the war and about your training?

JR: Well, there were some that thought it was too tough. And the girlfriends were mad because the guys were always tired. [laughter] I can remember an article in our school newspaper was saying, "What are they trying to do to our boyfriends, you know, on the obstacle course? They're killing them." But we ... were trying to get the ... boys in top physical condition so that knowing they were ... going to go in, most of them were gonna go in service. ... And many, many of them dropped out of high school to go in the service. Many of them enlisted. And unfortunately a lot of them were killed in action. ... Just off the top of my head, I must have had at least 60 to 70 students that were killed in action. And ... having worked with them in class and having known them, ... it was tough. In fact, every Memorial Day, they had something that they started in New Brunswick, I guess after World War I. And in the auditorium they had the names of the five or six World War I men who were killed in action that were graduates of New Brunswick High School. And, you know, it was quite an affective, seeing those names all the time. Well, World War II, on Memorial Day, they would always read the names of the people, students that had died, killed in the war. And, boy, that was rough, that was rough. Every year, to hear these names, you know, you can see these kids in the gym class and so forth. And that ... was the part of the war that I guess I hated. ... Especially when the ... first one was killed and so forth and so on. I started keeping a scrapbook. And I finally stopped, it was ... too much, it was really too much.

KP: Do you still have the scrapbook?

JR: Yeah, I still have it. ... In fact, ... just a couple of years ago, ... I was looking at it and we got talking at one of our reunions, you know, about so and so. And then I started seeing some of the letters the kids sent, ... thanking me. ... When they got to basic training, they were ahead of the rest and they were made platoon leaders or they got special privileges because they were ahead. They knew what to do. And ... we also ... taught them in those days it was called ju-jitsu. Now it's called Judo. And we taught them. In fact, George Dochet taught us this man-to-man defense. So we felt that we were preparing the kids to ... go into service and that they would be one step ahead. And, in turned out to be [helpful]. ... Even when I went into the maritime service, ... we went ... up to New York and we're standing outside the subway and I can still hear the guy saying, "Anybody here graduate from high school?" "Yeah." "Anybody here graduate from college?" So I put my hand up. I was the only one that graduated from college. You're it, you're in charge. So they put me in charge of ... the detail. I had to take these guys on the subway down to Sheepshead Bay. That's the way it was. ... These guys who graduated from New Brunswick High School, these kids, they had the job because ... we gave them the basic training.

KP: You mentioned that on Memorial Day that you would read the names of those who had died in war. How many years did you do that?

JR: ... Well, the principal, he did that. ... Well we were still doing it, I guess, when I retired. I've been retired for nineteen years. I don't think they do it anymore. I don't think they ... [do]. I really, if they did it now I would be very surprised, but in those days, ... in fact, the ... student body would ... come outside. And they had the monument in front of the high school and they always had a firing squad from either Camp Kilmer or Fort Dix and so forth. And it ... was very effective, I think, to the students to have these names read off and then have Taps and the firing of the ... volley of the firing squad and so forth and so on. And, I think it helped the kids appreciate what ... had happened. But I don't think it has continued.

KP: But it did last, you didn't retire until ...

JR: Oh, it lasted a long time. But, ... I know it lasted at least, I would say, at least to the late '60s, at least to the late 60's. ... That was something. I don't know how many other schools did that, but ... we were one of the ... first ones that did it. And, ... I think it was ... very appropo, you know. Even though schools close on Memorial Day, we always had our, what we called our Memorial Day assembly.

KP: You mentioned that you were very conscious preparing your students for war. How did you come up with the idea? Did the military and the army at all encourage you to do this? Did you have the sense that this would be something that would be useful? Did other schools follow what you were doing?

JR: I don't know what the other schools did, but all I know is that ... there was information that was available and there was articles that were available and that influenced us to have the obstacle course. Now, we knew that the military had the obstacle course, so our board of education was convinced that we should put an obstacle course next to the high school so that the students could be better prepared when they go in the service. Because we built the same obstacle course that they had in the military. And, at least, the ... kids, when they got there, they knew what to do. And, as far as the military marching concerned, I think we just did that on our own because we knew how to march. We had ROTC and each one of the teachers had had ROTC. All three of us were Rutgers grads. So we decided to teach it and ... they took to it. ... They enjoyed it and it was also ... a form of discipline. So it worked, it worked out. It worked out very well. So that's ... one reason we did it. I mean, the army didn't come in and tell us to do it and the principal didn't tell us to do it. We just did it. We just did it. ... We felt that as you keep changing your program you ought to make it a better program. You do it. We had ... lifetime sports after the war because, you know, you figured hey, let's add lifetime sports. We did away with military marching, tore down the obstacle course. Okay, it wasn't needed.

KP: You lived in the homefront during the war. Do you remember rationing?

JR: I sure do. I still have our ration book. We still have a couple of stamps. I didn't have a car, but it was ... tough with gas rationing. I remember, I took a team, 1943, I took the track team up

to Montclair for the state championship. We had to meet at the New Brunswick railroad station at six o'clock in the morning, the morning after the senior prom.

JG: Oh gosh!

KP: We had to take a train to Newark. We had to take a trolley from Newark to Montclair. And then after we got to Montclair, we had to walk four blocks from there to the ... (Woodman?) Field in Montclair, anyhow, that's the sight of the state track meet. And with the vaulting poles and javelins and everything else that goes with it. Spent the day there and, of course, had to come back. The only good thing is we won the state championship that day. In fact, they haven't won it since. And, ... I thought, "How did we ever do it? How did I do it? How did we do it? Take these kids on a train, in a bus and trolley car." But there was no ... transportation. You couldn't hire a bus and go, there was gas rationing.
I remember going to a student that I had and this student was able to get black market gas for which he was paying five dollars a gallon. And he drove myself and four other members up to Madison Square Garden for the indoor national track meet. And that's the only way we got to the track meet, ... with a student using black market gas. Because you couldn't get it, there was gas rationing. I never even got a car until 1946, but ...

KP: So in other words, you had a big salary, but you couldn't buy ....

JR: ... Had to travel by car, travel by bus or train, wherever you went, that was it. So, ... even taking my son up to visit his grandmother up in York, Pennsylvania, we'd have to take two trains and travel all day just to get up there for Christmas or whatever the case may be. But, ... the rationing, yes it was tough. You were limited to meat and cheeses and what have you and so forth and so on. But, ... we got through, you know. We survived. And everybody else was having the same problem, mixing the margarine, you know, putting the color in it to make it look like butter. [laughter] We went through that. ... Yeah, I remember the old A stickers, and the C stickers, and the B stickers in the cars. ... But, that was ... our sacrifice, you know, that we had to make. But it was minor compared to what the other people had to do.

KP: You were also a Civil Defense Warden?

JR: Well, all ... teachers were automatically civil defense wardens. That's right.

KP: Did you have any fears in 1941 and 1942 that there would be a direct attack?

JR: No, but we had to prepare for it. We had to ... practice air raid drills, go out in the hall, have the kids sit down and cover their heads, you know, and so forth and so on. So, we ... had to do that and we had to [do] air raid drills all ... the time. And then, of course, every Saturday at 12 o'clock, you know, ... all the air raid sirens would go off to test them. ... Oh, it made you think. It made you think that ... it could happen, especially when the Japanese started sending these incendiary bombs into the West Coast, you know. You figured, "Hey, what's happening here?" ... Yeah, ... you know, you had your feelings about it. Of course, we felt safer than they were over in Europe because we had the oceans between us.

KP: How many men were in your high school-- teachers, principals, and other staff people?

JR: Oh, ... all I can do is guess. I guess our ... faculty must have been about 30, 40, 50. It was ... a relatively big school in the state. ... During the war years, there was no Piscataway High School, no Edison, no East Brunswick, no South Brunswick. None, all those, ... they all came to New Brunswick. Everything came to New Brunswick. ... But then, of course, ... those areas weren't that big either. And I would say that we probably had an enrollment of about 1200, 1500 and then gradually ... all the high schools started building. Now they're all big and New Brunswick is small.

KP: You were director of athletics during the war?

JR: Not during the war, no. .. During the war, I was a track coach and a physical ed. teacher. I didn't become director of athletics until 23 years later. So, that would be, I became director of athletics in 1964.

KP: What was it like when the veterans came back? Did the veterans come back to your high school?

JR: Yes, they did. They came back and again they were much older than high school kids. ... Just like I was in college. And they kept them separated and they didn't have a homeroom. They weren't assigned homerooms with other students. They had the ... veteran's homeroom. That's what it was called, veteran's homeroom. And their homeroom was in the team locker room so that they could smoke. Okay? These guys had been in a war, okay? Some of them were wounded and so forth and so on. So, you couldn't ... restrict them to the same [standards]. ... They were excused from taking physical education because they were veterans and they had already gone through the war. And, I think, it had ... a good effect on the rest of the student body to have these fellows completing their high school education after having served in the military. That was good. ... I think that was a good effect, a very good effect. ... And, I also admired ... the guys for coming back and doing what they did. ...

KP: How many were there?

JR: I would say a good 24 or possibly 30 when it first started. And then each year it kept dwindling down, until it just wasn't necessary anymore. But, it was ... quite an experience, quite an experience. Even to the point where one student had contracted malaria in ... one of the islands, I guess in the Pacific. And he had a malaria attack. I didn't even know what a malaria attack was and he was ... having a malaria attack. And finally he told me, he says, "You know I had malaria," and so forth and so on. So that was another different experience that, okay you have students get sprained ankles or get sick or get what we called the flu, but here's a guy who had malaria. Malaria from the islands! You know what I mean? So don't touch. [laughter]

KP: These veterans, I mean, they were significantly older than the rest of the students.

JR: Yes, they were, actually. They were anywhere from, I would say three to five years older than the average high school kid.

KP: And they had experiences, for example, the malaria attack, what was it like for teachers to have people like that in class?

JR: It was different, you know. You had to ... be prepared, be prepared for anything. And, ... I presume that the academic teachers probably had a different problem than we had, physical, ours would be more physical, but theirs having a much older student in class and so forth and so on, having gone through the war, I don't know how they, you know, how they ... handled it. Well, actually they were more mature. There were no discipline problems, right. No discipline problems.

KP: Did you ever talk to any of these veteran students about their experiences? Did you ever have the chance?

JR: Well, yes. ... We have reunions and invariably they'll ... come back, ... and they'll talk about their experiences during the war. Because, some of them only see each other once a year, okay? Now, for example, a couple of years ago, we had a ... reunion of the athletes from 1938 to 1960. And, ... a couple fellows got swapping stories and they started talking about how they were prisoners of war. And they started talking, everybody around the table's listening. So stories, back and forth. Yes, a lot of experience, a lot of things discussed. One of them was a beach master and he was explaining about how he'd be the first one to go in on the islands and then he would tell the others how to come in, when to come in, what to do, and so forth, so on. And, I ... just can't visualize a man being the first one to go out and land on an island that's infested with Japanese and tell the GIs, "Well, okay. Okay, now, you know, do this or do that." And ... there were very interesting stories. And being on a PT boat and so forth like Kennedy. And, yes I ... had an opportunity to hear a lot, a lot, a lot of stories, ... more so maybe than the average person because I had contact with so many students. And then we'd have anywhere from 120 to 150 athletes at the reunion and of that group there were quite a few of them, now see, now they would be 65 to 70 years old now. So, there were quite a few of them. Quite a few.

KP: What about the teachers? You had mentioned that the three athletic teachers left your high school. Did they come back to New Brunswick High School?

JR: Yes, they all came back and ... completed their careers in education, ... mostly in administration.

KP: So they had gotten better jobs when they returned?

JR: One became the principal of the school for years and years and years. Another became the head of what they called the Title I program. Another one became the assistant superintendent of schools, ... guidance counselors, coaches, head coaches, and so forth. ... Yes, ... they all came back and ... did very well.

KP: How did they feel about you being on the homefront during the war? Did you ever feel ...

JR: No, ... because ... they knew my situation. I was the first one of all the coaches that had ... a child. They hadn't even gotten married yet, see. So then, of course, ... one of them got married a year later ... before he got shipped overseas, and then another one got married, and another got married, and then they all started having children, you know. But I was a grand old daddy, you know, I was a man of experience there. "Hey, what do you? How do you do this? How do you do that?" No. No, ... we were ... too friendly for that. ... No, there was no.

KP: There was no sense of resentment?

JR: No, absolutely no resentment at all. In fact, I think it may have been tilted the other way. I think they ... felt better that I didn't have to serve, that I was able to, you know, hold ... down the homefront as it is. ... Of course, I could be wrong, but that's ... a feeling I had.

KP: Yes. But you did feel sense of resentment on the train, the troop train?

JR: Oh, definitely! ... Not resentment. I felt ... guilt. There was no resentment. ... I can't say the GIs resented me. I just felt guilty and I felt so sorry for these young fellows that I knew, you know, were heading ... for the troop ... ship and they were going overseas.

KP: You spent a long time in the New Brunswick school system. What changes did you see over the course of your career? What were some of the highlights?

JR: Well, I think one of them was the introduction of career education. I guess they call that job training now, distributive education. I think, ... helping the ... handicap, also helping the student that didn't have the ... wear-with-all as far as mentality is concerned, where they brought in teachers that were specialized in helping the handicap or disadvantaged student. ... They were probably the biggest changes that I could see. And then ... trying to get the student ready to take his place in society and also in the job market. And, I understand, but now ... that's changing too, they tell me. I mean, ... we used to have a ... power machine, a power shop where they had automotive training and taught kids how to be auto mechanics in high school. I understand that's down the drain. I understand ... they don't even have libraries anymore, I understand. ... I understand the City of New Brunswick where they had a library in every school, now ... I understand they only have two librarians. They're cutting back. They're cutting back to save money on so many ... departments and so forth and so on. Home economics, I think, is all changed now. Every girl took sewing and cooking. I understand that's all changed. So that's the thing that I thought was great. I thought that when they had home economics and ... they had typing, helping and teaching girls to become secretaries and so forth. ... I don't think it's ... that way anymore. I could be wrong, but I think that changed.

KP: When did distributive career education come into New Brunswick High School?

JR: When?

KP: Yes.

JR: Right after the war. Right after the war and ... it was great. They started the school store and they had the opportunity to ... learn how to conduct a business and so forth. They ran their own business, they ran the school store just like they have at Rutgers, they have the campus store. And ... then of course, they had ... another program that was, I think Junior Chamber of Commerce used to have a program where the ... kids would ... work and ... have certain projects. ... And then they would teach them to run a business. And they ... actually had their own little business while they were in high school, something that they designed. And I thought that was terrific, but that ... has changed, too. ... But what goes around comes around. Now they're trying to do the same thing. Now that President Clinton is trying to start that all over again. So, it wasn't that bad.

KP: I just recently interviewed George Claflen, who was on the school board.

JR: George turned out to be president of the board of education where I was teaching and we were classmates.

KP: And he said he was president of the board at a very difficult time.

JR: Oh, definitely, during the race riots.

KP: Do you have memories of that time?

JR: Terrible, terrible. I cried, cried. One weekend, I went home and cried. ... I'm not ashamed to tell you. I was really affected because I was a track coach. And in those days, they weren't black athletes, they were colored. ... Then they were negroes. Then they were black. Now they're Afro-Americans. Keeps changing. I don't know what's coming next. But I was so close to those kids and it hurt. It really, really hurt when I saw the police come in here and start banging heads with their clubs you know and so forth, so on. ... It was probably one of the worst weekends of my life.

KP: What had happened?

JR: Well, ... it was a fight. And I mean there was a riot. What can I tell you? It was a riot.

KP: How did it start?

JR: Well, who knows. I don't know, but it ... started. Whether it was in the cafeteria or whether it was in the hall. ... But it started. And it would be brewing over a period of time because ... it was society. ... And, I guess, ... when I first started teaching at New Brunswick, we probably didn't have more than a dozen negro students in school. And, ... then of course, it changed and then, I guess, in the early '60s when the race riots came along, New Brunswick had quite a few black students who just ... felt cheated. ... And, some of the things that they were subjected to were wrong. Just definitely wrong.

KP: What were some of the things they objected to? You said in some cases they were right?

JR: ... I guess the way they had to live. And ... they couldn't get the jobs that the white kids were getting. ... They couldn't make the money that the white kids were getting. They didn't ... have the respect. They had it in athletics. When they got on that football field or when they ran in a race, hey they were as good as ... anybody else, okay? But when they went home, I guess, it was a different story. ... I think that part, that ... probably had a lot to do with it. They ... probably were having trouble being accepted by society. And, ... I just felt sorry for them because I was so close to them. But it hurt me. It hurt me when ... the riots came along and then we started having these sensitivity sessions and meetings with the kids and ... they organized the students, you know, so many blacks, so many whites, male, female, and the students got together at having meetings. They finally straightened it out. But it was tough having police on duty. Now, big deal. I saw on television today, oh, they're having police on duty in high schools now. Big deal, they had that 30 years ago. But now with the violence and the schools being so bad. Now, we didn't have that kind of violence. We didn't have guns or knives or anything like that. But, ... we had to have police on duty in the hall for ... months. Then they did away with the police and they started having security aides. And they've had security aides ever since. You go into school, you got to sign in, okay? Now you have metal detectors. But I took an early retirement. I retired nineteen years ago, because I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't ... take ... the racial problems. ... It was just too much. I didn't think it was worth ... while.

KP: You were close to a lot of black athletes?

JR: Oh, tremendous, tremendously close. Tremendously close. And, ... then of course, when we'd go to these reunions these black athletes that come up to me now and they'll say, "Boy, you were like a father to me. You were ... the father, I never had." Hey, you know, boy that gets you, that gets you. But, you know, I ... respected them for what they were and what they had.

KP: Do you think other teachers were as straight with them and as fair to them?

JR: Well, I can't ... speak for other teachers.

KP: Did they ever complain about other teachers?

JR: I mean, they never came to me and complained. I know ... there just had to be some prejudiced teachers. Let's face it, when you had a staff of 35 or 40, there had to some that were prejudiced. And whether they were the academic side of it, I don't know. But I do know that when you got down into the gymnasium and out on the playing fields it was even. It didn't matter what your color was. It was how you could throw the ball and how you could run.

KP: In our interview with George Claflen, he mentioned that there was quite a struggle in New Brunswick over the question of regionalization.

JR: Oh, unbelievable, unbelievable.

KP: How did you feel about the issue at the time?

JR: Well, ... I felt sad because so many of the ... good athletes came from the sending districts. And, ... I honestly think I would not have the success I had in coaching had it not been for the ... athletes that came from the sending districts. And my cross country teams, all my long distant runners, were all from the sending districts, not ... from the city streets. And when North Brunswick and Milltown decided to pull out of New Brunswick, it was a blow. It was really a blow, because they were taking away the equalizer. Okay? Let's face it, there were whites that helped blacks, and were blacks that helped whites, all right. And I always felt that they each gain from each other by being in a classroom. And when you took all the whites from Milltown and North Brunswick out, what happened to New Brunswick? The black population went up, the Hispanic population went up and the whites put their kids in St. Peters and St. ... (Allawisious'?) or Saint ... who, you know, parochial schools. So it ... became, you know, more segregated than ever. And so the regionalization thing, that ... started it, that started it. But you know what? Now the very, very same district, North Brunswick, that pulled their kids out of New Brunswick because of the problem, are now having the same problems themselves. Now they're having sensitivity sessions. Now their teachers are meeting to learn how to handle the social problems of the whites and the blacks, and so forth and so on. So ... there's that circle again.

KP: You feel that sense of history repeating itself.

JR: See? Yeah. And I ... hear these things and I see these things. I mean, ... when I get back from Vermont and I started hearing, in fact, ... I went over to North Brunswick High School, and this is the time to push the button.

[TAPE PAUSED]

I was you know, I was just being facetious over that.

KP: You taught high school during World War II and then you also taught during Korea and Vietnam. Do you have any memories of that?

JR: Once again, I had some of my top runners, in fact, John Dzelzkalns, who excelled in track at Rutgers, went to Korea and he made it back. But, yes, once again, I had quite a few ... students in Korea. And then Vietnam, you know. We ... went through it all again. I mean, ... we didn't change our curriculum ... like we did in World War II, for Vietnam and Korea.

KP: You did not create an obstacle course?

JR: No, no, nothing. Well, number one because, with Korea, the students were told ... they weren't in a war, they were in a police action. Okay? And, then of course, Vietnam, who knows? Nobody knew what was going on. It was just what they wanted us to know. But ... yes, once again, we had a lot of athletes that ... went over to Vietnam and went to Korea. Just ... like World War II. The same thing. And I'm sure they'll be there when the next one comes along. So they

probably went to, I don't know because I've been out of touch for nineteen years, but they were probably over in the Gulf, too. And they may be over their now.

KP: Jennifer ...

JG: I just have a question, you talked about race relations in New Brunswick. What were the race relations like at Rutgers within New Brunswick?

JR: What do you mean?

JG: When you went to school?

JR: When I was at Rutgers?

JG: Yes.

JR: I ca not even visualize seeing a black student. I can't visualize having a black student in class. That's embarrassing. I can't visualize. That's awful, isn't it? I ... know there must have been black students, but I can't ... think of any in ... my School of Education. I don't think we had any in the School of Education at that time. There must have been ... somebody. I don't know, a chemist, an engineer, I don't know. But, no, we ... didn't have them, but, of course that changed. That changed tremendously.

KP: When you were in school Paul Robeson came back to sing. How did students feel about Paul Robeson?

JR: Well it ... was a little difficult. We respected him as an athlete, but then again, there were so much, all we were fed was about this communism. ... That's the only thing that we were fed, communism, communism. In fact, ... I remember going to the University of Penn to see his son play against Penn for Cornell. And, ... I actually [had] more respect for his son than I did for him. It wasn't until later years that ... we found out through different readings of the Rutgers Alumni Monthly, that it wasn't what we were led to believe. So, you know, what can I say? ... I was duped, I was duped. Okay?

KP: J&J was a big presence always in New Brunswick. Johnson and Johnson.

JR: Oh yes, yes. It was in fact, ... the house ... where I stayed, where I roomed, he worked at J&J. And J&J, I guess, was to New Brunswick what Campbell Soup and RCA Victor was ... to Camden. It was, just ... everybody and his uncle I guess worked at the J&J. So, but it sure changed the town though didn't it, ... with the world building ... Oh, unbelievable.

KP: After most of your students graduated from high school, where would most of them go to work? Would most of them go to work at Johnson and Johnson in factories?

JR: I have no idea. I really don't.

KP: Would most of your athletes go on to college?

JR: Let's say quite a few of them did. Of course, all the good athletes did. New Brunswick High School was famous for its math and science departments. National Talent Search, National Merit Scholarship. I think they ... must still have it. But for years New Brunswick High School students would ... win merit scholarships every year. In fact, the legislature honored New Brunswick High School for having more merit scholarships winners, National Talent Search, not ... talent, National Science Search, whatever it was. I can't think of the ... actual name of it right now, but it had to do with ... science. And, of course, when the student body changed, that changed. I can't remember ever reading in the last fifteen years of anybody getting anything. Now it's East Brunswick High School. Now East Brunswick High School has all the winners and ... they've had more winners than I guess, [than] most other schools. So it has changed. And again, it's because of where they live.

KP: Jennifer, do you have any more questions?

JG: Yes, I just have one more question. You talked about the change in your school system. You stayed in the area. What do you think about the changes that occurred with Rutgers? And how Rutgers has evolved since you have been here?

JR: Well, it's too big. For me, for me, it's ... too big. Case in point: I attended a church supper in the town, Rocky Hill, the other day. And there was a girl sitting there with her mother and father and ... we sat down and introduced ourselves and so forth, so on. And she said, she was a student at Rutgers. "Oh, Rutgers. Oh, I went to Rutgers." "Oh you did?" "Yeah. Yeah Class of '42." "'42!" Okay, she's the student at Rutgers, now. So, I started asking her questions. She couldn't answer them. And I was trying to explain to her about Kirkpatrick Chapel and I was trying to explain how when I was a student at Rutgers everybody had to go to chapel at 12 o'clock, which only lasted about ten-fifteen minutes. I was excused from going because I was a waiter at Stollman's Restaurant. So I ... had a job and I had to serve on the tables, so I didn't go. She never heard of Kirkpatrick Chapel, didn't know where it was. That is why I said to you, it's too big. I think they lost, ... look, there's nothing wrong with it. ... I'm proud ... of Rutgers. I'm proud of what they're doing. I think in stature they're probably one of the top ten universities in the country ... as far as research and what have you.

----------END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE----------

JR: But I'm on the outside looking it in, but it's big.

KP: You said, how long did it take to get between classes?

JR: ... Ten minutes.

KP: For you and ...

JR: Ten minutes, now it's 40. And the biggest ... transportation bus system in the state of New

Jersey is ... at Rutgers. It's unheard of. But they need it. I mean, let's face it, they need it. ... And I took the tour. I took the tour at ... my 50th reunion. We went on a bus and we rode all around and ... being a local, I was able to explain a lot of the things that they didn't know. And it was, "Oh, well that was this and that was that and so forth and so on." But it's ... just ... so big, so monstrous, unbelievable. But I hope that students don't lose ... out on the bigness of it. I hope it's not just going to class and getting an education and that's it. You know, what I mean? And then getting on a bus and going to another thing.

KP: In other words you think that you had quite a social world around Rutgers that might be missing from Rutgers today?

JR: Yeah, ... right. It was family. Here so much these days about family and I ... think that ... we were closer. We were closer. And the fact that we walked to class on campus and ten minutes between one class to another and ... then again, too, class size. I mean some of our classes, we only had twelve in a class. The ... biggest class was probably military science when everybody had to be there for ROTC. But, ... there must be students that are gone through Rutgers in four years and probably don't know more than 100 people. ... That's my point.

JG: What I think is the most interesting is working, I work with alumni, and to see people who graduated who are much more interested in the welfare and what's going on with the college than the students who go here now.

JR: Exactly.

JG: Like you said she didn't know where Kirkpatrick is. Well most people don't know what Queens College is who go here now.

JR: She didn't know where Queens College [is]. ... I mentioned Queens College, you know, and ... she didn't know and I'm trying ... to indoctrinate her. ... But hey, she's just, "I gotta go to class. I gotta get a bus to get to the next class and then I ... have to go home."

JG: Do you feel that support, or you know Rally for Rutgers has been lost? That's how I feel, I personally go here now, and I don't feel, like I talk to alumni and they're like, "Yes, Rutgers." And you don't see that in students now.

JR: ... You have it athletically, but I don't think you have it any other way. I don't know whether ... all the chemists in the School of Chemistry are [as] close as all the fellows were in the School of Education when I was here. ... We knew each other. ... We knew all about each other. We were [close], we were a family, we were close and the bigness ... of Rutgers, not that ... it's wrong, but the bigness of it, ... I think is gonna ... be in [a] disadvantage in that respect. You're not going to become as friendly as you were when it was a small school, but then maybe the advantages outweigh that. ... Because being as big as they are, they probably have more to offer, and can do more things, and they probably have a ... bigger staff. And ... they're able to do more with what they have. So, ... how's that with you?

KP: No, I found that the bigness sometimes a problem, I went to a very small college, I went to

Drew University, and I noticed that you gained quite a bit from knowing everyone from the teachers to the administrators to most of the students. You knew everyone. Coming to Rutgers, while I enjoyed a lot of the opportunities at Rutgers and I was as a graduate student better able to use them, it's still quite intimidating. You know the president of the university isn't going to recognize who you are.

JR: How often do you have a Rutgers campus wide staff meeting?

KP: I have never been to one. Exactly.

JR: There you are. So, ... it works both ways. Not only with the students, but you have the same thing at the top. You have ... faculty members that probably never ever met.

KP: Oh, definitely. In fact, I haven't even met all the people at the history department.

JR: That's a case in point. ... When I was a student a Rutgers, the history department was in a house over there and all the history teachers were in that house. Okay? At Bishop. ... And the physical education, they all had offices in the gym, every ... person there was in that ... building. And zoology department, you name it. And that's what you lost in the ... administration I think is what you're also losing in the student body. Again, not that it's a disadvantage because they are getting a good education and ... I think that a degree or an education from Rutgers is ... very widely accepted nationally. You don't have to be ashamed to say you went to Rutgers. I hope. [laughter]

KP: I just wanted to follow up on a few things that you said about ...

JR: Timeout.
PAUSE

KP: I just wanted to ask a few questions about your maritime service. You had mentioned that you had been deferred because you were a ...

JR: Right.

KP: A pre-Pearl Harbor baby, rather father.

JR: Father. [laughter] ...

JR: The group that you were with, you were the only college educated person.

JR: That's right.

KP: Where did most of the people come from in your contingent?

JR: Texas, Oklahoma, Far West. Uneducated, young kids. And ... I felt like a grandfather in the barracks. It was ... unbelievable. ... Just absolutely unbelievable.

KP: Did all of them know how to read?

JR: ... Well they ... didn't have to read. They just did what ... they were told to do. ... It was very obvious that ... that wasn't for me to just, you know, that's why I applied for purser school. So I ... had the interviews, took the exam and ... I wasn't worried about not getting in because of ... my background at Rutgers and so forth and so on. But it was ... quite an experience. It was.

KP: These people from Oklahoma, Texas, what was it like for them to encounter New York, for example, the subway and the crowds of people?

JR: ... They didn't know how to change a t-shirt. They didn't know what it was to change a t-shirt everyday. It was ... sad, actually sad. But, ... then again, by the time the ... officers at the maritime got ... them through basic training, they ... would've been alright. They'd been okay. ... Otherwise, ... they'd been discharged.

KP: How long were you at Sheepshead Bay?

JR: Five weeks I was there, five weeks.

KP: So you went through all of the basic training for merchant marine.

JR: Well, for me it was elementary, you know.

KP: In fact, you had taught all this.

JR: ... But parts of it were new like the fire training, you know, what to do in case of fire on the ship, how to identify planes and so forth and so on. That was a new experience. And the military part of it was different. And so then in that case I was a student all over again. But it was ... a challenge. And one good thing is that ... we were able to get things there that you couldn't get as a civilian, candy. [laughter] So when I came back to my wife and son, I came back with bags of forbidden candies that you couldn't get in the store.

KP: So you ate better as a merchant marine trainee?

JR: Oh yeah, we had good food. I'll say that much. Good food. And being, again, once again, a value of a college education, ... I was a temporary petty officer so we wore a white hat instead of a black hat. And we marched the troops over to ... get their food three times a day and then after we got them over there, then we go to the front of the line and get the food first. [laughter] So that was an advantage. Look, I'm in trouble. I have to be somewhere else soon.

KP: No, that's fine, I understand that you have to leave. Let me just say this concludes an interview with Mr. John C. Ragone on November 2, 1994 with Kurt Piehler and Jennifer Grigas. And thank you very much.

JR: Right.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

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