

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD BELDING

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Mr. Edward "Ed" Belding, Class of 1965, at South Brunswick Public Library in Monmouth Junction, South Brunswick Township. Today's date is March 21, 2024. I'm Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for sitting down with me. I appreciate it.

Ed Belding: I appreciate being here.

SI: Just for the record, we're here in the Mary Cecile Leedom Local History Room at the library. We thank the library for allowing us this space and thank you, Ed, for setting it up.

EB: Okay. Yes, we call her Ceil Leedom. That's what she preferred, to be called Ceil Leedom.

SI: Great. First, where and when were you born?

EB: Interesting way to start. I was born October 23, 1942, North Adams, Massachusetts, which is in the northwest corner of the state and very close to Williamstown. That's where I spent my first years of life. Williams College is nestled in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and I have a close connection to Williams College.

If you look at some of my writings there, you'll see that I have my name, Ed. E-D-Period, and then, Belding. The reason for the period is because I'm two people. The "Ed" starts with my first name that is on my baptismal certificate (that I was never able to obtain). That is Edward Selden Spaulding.

Little did I know, because I didn't do my research on my paternal side of my family until I was in my late twenties, that this was a very affluent, WASP family who sent their son to Williams College because he couldn't get into Yale, which was the traditional school that Spauldings went to. We're talking about the Buffalo Spauldings.

The Buffalo Spauldings were headed by Elbridge Gerry Spaulding, who is my great, great grandfather. He was the one who was called "the father of the greenback dollar." I found out all about this when I started doing genealogy research in my late twenties. Rutgers had an instrumental part in starting me on that journey and helping me out. I'll get into that later.

[Editor's Note: Elbridge Gerry Spaulding (1809-1897) served New York's 32nd District in the US House of Representatives from 1849 to 1851 as a Whig and from 1859 to 1863 as a Republican. He wrote the Legal Tender Act, which allowed the government to issue dollars not backed by gold or silver.]

Anyway, I was born to Edward Rich Spaulding, who was attending Williams College at the time, and Elizabeth Marcella Barrett. Elizabeth Marcella Barrett, my mother, was a waitress on the main street in Williamstown. She met my father, I don't know what the circumstances were, but, since I was born October 23rd, I was probably conceived sometime in March of the same year.

At the time, my father was toying with the idea (my natural father was toying with the idea) of signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was a standout pitcher at Williams College. He had

attended the Hill School in Pennsylvania before going to Williams College. He was from Santa Barbara, California. I didn't know anything about any of this until I started to put two-and-two together and do the search.

Anyway, my mother got pregnant and my father had signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers. They shipped him up to Montreal because [of] the AAA team up there. Well, he did AA, and then, he went AAA. AAA is the stopping point before you get into the majors. He was pitching for the Montreal Royals.

My mother went up there to be with him, but Branch Ricky, who was running the Brooklyn Dodgers and their farm system, discouraged players from having their family join them or be with them. So, as I understand it, my father sent my mother back.

I could have been born in Canada, Montreal, but I was not. She came back to Williamstown. The hospital was in North Adams and that's where I was born.

My father never came back to Williams. He never graduated from Williams. His baseball career lasted until 1945. He went back to Santa Barbara, California. I didn't know anything about him or what he was doing and all that stuff.

My mother drifted around from waitress job to job to job. Before I turned eight years old, I had moved to Florida, moved to Ohio, back to Massachusetts, and maybe a couple other places I don't remember, because I was pretty young. We had it rough. It was a rough time.

SI: Did your mother have any family?

EB: Yes, but some of them were not too kind to her because she had gotten pregnant. I didn't know whether they had officially married or not. I have been told by some sources that they did officially marry. They snuck up to Readsboro, Vermont, which is right across the border, got married by a justice of the peace up there.

Okay, so, that was his first marriage. Altogether, my natural father married three times. That's for a later part of the story.

So, anyway, she wanted to get out of Williamstown. She was from a blue-collar family, Irish, but she swore she was Norman French. "The Barretts were Norman French," okay. She would never admit that she was full-blooded Irish. So, that was a big joke in the family later on.

So, then, she found another Williams student, the man who became my step-father. He probably did graduate from Williams. I'm not a hundred percent sure. Anyway, they met at the Williams Inn, which was owned by the Treadway Inn Complex at the time.

When they married, I was living with my grandmother and the person she remarried, who was Earl Rounds, a full-blooded Mohawk Indian. I thought he was the greatest guy in the world. My mother hated him and a lot of people in the Barrett Family didn't like him at all. He was in South Williamstown in a farm area. So, I enjoyed being with him.

My grandmother was a very dour, very serious type person, not friendly at all. So, I stuck around my “grandfather” and went wherever he went--oh, not my grandfather, but I guess my step-grandfather.

So, anyway, my mother remarried and she was pregnant at the time with my half-brother, Jay. So, Jay always goes around saying he's the reason why they got married. Anyway, my mother needed a ticket out, okay, and this John Belding was her ticket out of Williamstown.

So, we moved down to Bloomfield, New Jersey. From Bloomfield, New Jersey (we were there for maybe less than a year), then, we moved to Ridgewood, New Jersey. Then, Ridgewood, New Jersey, was where I grew up most of my years, high school, and then, came down to Rutgers. I never went back to Ridgewood, because the family, by then, had moved down to Brielle, New Jersey.

Now, the wrinkle in this, when you talk about birth and all that, was--and I don't know, I still to this day don't know--why I wasn't adopted and had my name legally changed until I was seventeen years old. Nobody would tell me. My mother wouldn't tell me about the past at all.

She did save some things, though, that I found in the attic. So, I used to raid her trunk that she had with her stuff and secretly look at the stuff, and then, put it back. So, she never knew that I was looking and interested and all that, because I was afraid to ask. I didn't want to upset the apple cart.

Turned out that John Belding was fifteen years older than I was, but they were lying about their ages. My mother was lying that she was ten years younger than she actually was, but she was older than John Belding was.

Okay, so, anyway, I get hauled into court at seventeen years old for the adoption. John's uncle, eccentric guy from England. For my driver's license or for my driver's instruction--in the high school, you have to give your birth certificate, to prove your age--and I had to have a birth certificate to compete in Little League baseball.

What he did (this is before I was seventeen), he came up with the idea of a forged birth certificate. So, what he did was, he had a paper with the name Belding on it, and it was laminated, so [that] you couldn't examine the authenticity of the paper. It was all coated and protected.

So, he is the lawyer for us for the adoption. So, he says, "Whatever you do, always agree with what the Judge says, okay?" "Oh, yes, okay, good." Again, I didn't want to upset the apple cart. By that time, we had six kids in the family— my half-brothers and half-sisters.

So, we go in there. There's a whole half circle of couples with their adopted infants. I'm the only one in there that's a teenager. The only one the Judge can talk to is me. For all the other ones, he can only talk to the adoptive parents.

So, he's asking me questions, "Do you know this? Do you know that? Do you know your father? Everybody agree?" this and that. I agreed on everything.

As I look back on it now, I should have been asking some real important questions, like, "Why the hell was I adopted at seventeen?" When they got married, I was eight, turning nine. So, technically, my name for all those years up to seventeen, including most of seventeen, would be Edward Selden Spaulding, which turned out to be my natural grandfather's name.

In the Spaulding Family, they took the name and did it every other generation. So, my father's name, Edward Rich Spaulding, is his grandfather's name. My grandfather's Edward Selden Spaulding.

Then, the Judge asked me, "Well, do you want to keep the name as it stands, the Edward Selden?" I said, "Well, everybody's been calling me Eddie, Ed, Edward, whatever. So, I'll keep that," and this is the first I'd heard of Selden. I said, "Oh, that's a corny name. I don't want that name."

So, my mother had a brother named Bob, Robert, World War II vet. He was a decorated guy in the Navy, and so forth. I looked up to him and he was one of my early father figures, because I was always in need of a father figure. For those first eight years, if it was Earl, I called him Uncle Earl--he wasn't really my uncle--and Uncle Bob, and so forth. So, these are my father figures. Then, the guy who was fifteen years older than me, he comes along, he's my stepfather.

So, I was using the name Belding ever since they got married, but really, legally, I was Spaulding. What happens is, I say, "Well, I don't want Selden, okay. I'll take Robert." So, my name became Edward Robert Belding.

It's sort of ironic that the Belding-Spaulding is not too far removed from each other. I can remember when they announced the names at the Little League games, because we were in that competition where they have the Little League All-Star teams. They compete and they go all the way to Williamsport. We didn't get that far.

Anyway, at those games, they were announcing me as Edward Selden Spaulding. I had friends in the stands and teammates and all that. They're saying, "Well, how come they announced that name?" I said, "Oh, they must have mispronounced it, Belding-Spaulding." So, I got through that. I bluffed through that.

They never caught me using the fake birth certificate, but, now, I had a new birth certificate. It had a little clause there, "Revised," and it had the date when it was revised. So, that has been my birth certificate ever since then--but, it's still a mystery as to why the delay?

Probably, there was money involved. The Spauldings are a very wealthy family and the Beldings were upper middle-class. So, in this whole scheme of things and how fate works out, I was lucky because I was born into a family that was well-off. They weren't hurting for anything.

I had that experience with my mother when she was solo, of desperately looking and [living] paycheck to paycheck, living in divey apartments and this type of thing, and so forth. Then, this guy, John Belding, comes along.

He was struggling at first. He had one of these parents that was really heavy into the Protestant [work] ethic. He was a Norman Vincent Peale-type guy. He would say, "You've got to work for everything that you earn."

He had money. He had done very well, during the Depression, buying stock that nobody else wanted to buy. He was into advertising in New York. He was a good guy. He was sort of quiet, reserved, but he was a good guy. Anyway, he helped out and he was able to get a house for my stepfather in Ridgewood.

So, that's why we moved from Bloomfield to Ridgewood. The house in Bloomfield was my step-grandmother's aunt's house— big, three-story Victorian. I loved it there. It was great. I loved Bloomfield, and I didn't like Ridgewood that much.

Bloomfield was blue-collar and, for some reason, I was always attracted to blue-collar. Maybe it was my dirt-scrabble experience during those first eight years of my life, but I always gravitated to it. I think that's why I ended up teaching in New Brunswick.

I consider, like, the Rutgers experience a gritty experience compared to an affluent experience at Princeton. So, I always have that in me, too, that thing of, "Well, what if this happened?" I was allegedly born with a silver spoon in my mouth and that was taken away from me instantly. It's ironic. Here, I'm rambling a little bit...

SI: No, no.

EB: But, when I finally contacted my paternal relatives, who were still alive, this was after my father had passed away, which was kept a secret from me. I didn't learn until six months after he passed away that he'd passed away.

SI: Wow.

EB: His third wife thought it would be a good idea for me to meet my paternal relatives--his third wife, who wasn't blood-related at all. She said, "This isn't right." She found me. I didn't know anything about her. So, we made arrangements. I went out there once to visit, but, before then, I had been corresponding with some people.

Somebody sent me some things of my father's, like a briefcase he used for his work, which had some articles in it. In the briefcase was a silver spoon, with some other things. I thought, "Is this a joke? Is somebody trying to pull a cruel joke on me?" I still have that silver spoon with me.

SI: Oh, wow.

EB: Yes. That's the silver spoon I never got to use, [laughter] but that's the birth story going through the thing, where it'd come from and where it led to. So, that was quite, I would say, an interesting story. It has yet to be written. Of course, I write a lot. The reason I haven't written it is because, in my genealogy search of the Spauldings, I ran across the Edwards family.

Out in Santa Barbara (and, well, State of California), the Edwards Family, very wealthy, affluent, and the Spaulding Family, wealthy, affluent, were very tight, intermarried, so forth. My natural father's sister, older sister, married an Edwards and they had some kids. One of the kids was the name Spaulding Edwards. He was the first graduate of the Laguna Blanca School.

You could look that one up. That's a school that originally was for wealthy kids who lived in the Hope Ranch section of Santa Barbara, which was where the wealthiest people in the wealthy town of Santa Barbara lived.

"Ding" Edwards, being the rogue that he was, was married. His wife was expecting; I believe their second kid. This is all stuff I found out years later. He impregnates this nurse, has an affair with her. She's pregnant the same time this guy Ding Edward's wife is pregnant.

He goes to his wife, asks for a divorce, so [that] he can marry the nurse. The wife refuses. He goes to his office and commits suicide. The daughter of the affair, Georgia Spaulding Edwards, was living up in the state of Washington.

There was a Dr. Sam Edwards, who was dying of cancer. He was doing a genealogy study of Spauldings and Edwards. He found out about me. He contacted me. This was like in 1980 or '81. He says, "I'm doing this research," and so forth. He didn't mention anything about he's dying of cancer. The genealogy was the last thing he wanted to do— get this thing all in order.

He says, "You know you have a cousin, Georgia Spaulding Edwards, who has a similar story to yours. You might want to contact her." He says, "I'm going to mention that I contacted you and I'll encourage her to contact you."

Well, I contacted her and we hit it off great, because it turns out the Spauldings and the Edwards blamed her and her mother for the suicide of their precious Ding Edwards. I'm shunned by the family because they were worried that my father was going to commit suicide, because he never came back to my mother or anything like that.

So, I was shunned, this Georgia Edwards Spaulding is shunned, and we finally connect. Of all the people that I tried to contact, and so forth, we're still corresponding, after several, several years. She's great. She's retired and she raises truffle hunting dogs, a real specialty type thing. They're a French dog, real big, with hair over their eyes.

I told her, I said, "Eventually, we'll write the story. We'll call it 'Black Sheep, Black Sheep.'" We have two stories to tell, 'Tale of Two Cities,' 'Prince and the Pauper' type of thing. She had it worse than me, because she was a doctor in Santa Barbara. She had to deal with some of those people who were shunning her and giving her a hard time there. She eventually moved out of there.

I didn't have that experience. I just didn't know. The only one who was really cooperative with me--and this is where I get the inspiration to do the art, and I picked that up after I retired from teaching--was Selden Spaulding. Remember, my middle name was Selden. Well, his first name was Selden Spaulding. People in the family called him Denny.

Well, he was my natural father's brother. He had a very interesting story to tell, but he never married--he was the first one to tell me--because of Huntington's disease in the family. This is the disease, Huntington's chorea, that killed Woody Guthrie. It's a hereditary disease.

It turned out that my grandfather married a lady whose family had Huntington's disease and that she died of it. Her brother committed suicide. Okay, so, suicide was in the family. This was, like, a real nervous type of thing in the family, "hush-hush," because you're talking about an affluent family, Protestant, "hide it under the carpet," "don't talk about it."

Anyway, Selden never married, never wanted to have any kids. He had some sort of falling out with my natural father. They didn't speak, but, when I found him, he spilled the beans about the medical history. That's the main reason why I got into the finding out about my paternal side, because my wife and I had two kids.

We were concerned. The doctors were saying, "Well, what's your medical history?" "I don't know." So, we found out pretty quick. When we got the news of the Huntington's disease in the family, we were shocked. We already had the kids.

With Huntington's disease, it doesn't really show until maybe you're in your thirties, forties. So, you already had your kids when you're in your twenties, right. If you show signs of it, then, your kids have a very good chance of getting it.

So, what happened was, here's my uncle, who didn't marry, didn't have any kids, because he was afraid of it. Here's my natural father, who goes ahead and has six more kids, me and six more kids by his second wife. I always thought that was pretty risky and pretty selfish, but he didn't show any signs of it, my uncle didn't show any signs of it.

When Huntington's disease doesn't show in a generation, then, it won't show in the next generations. So, Arlo Guthrie doesn't have it. It stopped with Woody, didn't go to Arlo. Okay, well, it stopped with my father, didn't go to me, so, my kids will never have it. So, that medical thing was now not a big deal.

Then, I found out some more medical stuff from Georgia because she was a doctor in Santa Barbara. She actually, ironically, had treated my grandfather, the one I was named after. So, she was able to provide me more information. This is technically after my Uncle Selden died.

The reason I went out to Santa Barbara, about eight months after my father had died, was to just pay my respects. I was taken to the site where they threw his ashes. The Spaulding Family owns a ranch out in a desert area. It's sort of near where Ronald Reagan's ranch is. They tell me it's

very expensive land out there--although you look at it, it looks like desert, doesn't look like New Jersey. [laughter]

So, my half-brother out there, Bruce Spaulding, served as my escort around, to see this and that. He takes me up to the highest point on the ranch property. We looked down into this huge valley, looked like death valley, because it's all desert. There's Michael Jackson's ranch, way in the far, far distance. I don't know, was it Happy Land or something like that?

SI: Neverland.

EB: Yes, Neverland. Okay, so, that's where they were. The Spauldings had cattle and they just roamed free on the thing, but you can't get near them. The bulls will attack you, that type of thing. So, I was way out of my league. The squirrels were living underground. It was just odd.

It was just in the summer and the pine trees were cracking. Actually, you could physically hear them, the branches of sap and the heat cracking them and all that. So, it was a weird experience, but I got to see where my father's ashes were scattered and I met several people—some related, some not.

They were cold, for the most part, awkward. I passed that off as just the nature of their upbringing and that type of thing, suspicious of strangers. I didn't get the experience of being welcomed into their home, like, "Oh, you could stay with us," that type of thing.

I had to rent a motel room. People would pick me up in their car and take me to a place. It was always neutral places, like a museum or a restaurant or something like that. Finally, we got to visit the Hope Ranch, where the Laguna Blanca School is. My natural father had gone there. All his relatives had gone there, my half-brothers and half-sisters, they went there, because, at the time, my grandfather was the headmaster of the school.

Then, they took me to the house of my natural father's second wife. That was an odd experience. She had kicked out my father. So, he married a third time. She had married her accountant and he was raising carp in ponds around the property. The large house had once been the clubhouse for the golf course in the Hope Ranch.

Now, the Hope Ranch is named after the Hope Diamond. This was for, as I say, the wealthiest of the wealthy. Now, the former Mrs. Spaulding owns the clubhouse. We go into the house and this huge room (I guess you could call it the living room) has a fireplace at this end, has a fireplace at the other end, and has all these couches in the middle.

We're sitting there. I had been told before I go in, "Don't say a word about your father. Don't ask any questions, don't make any comments." All I could talk about was me and Massachusetts and all that stuff. So, that was an experience.

Nine-thirty on the clock, she says, "It's time to go." Now, this is to her kids, "It's time to go." There were three of them there with me. So, I got to see four out of the six--two refused to see me--and we had to get up and leave when she said to leave.

She was, I wouldn't call her eccentric, but I'd call her somebody who was into herself. She knew where she was from. Her mother had been a silent screen actress, Margaret McDonald, had been with some of the most famous, Fatty Arbuckle and all those from the silent screen era.

She had been left millions. So, when she married my father--and she was a kid at the Laguna Blanca School--I believe they married when she was seventeen. So, he robbed the cradle there.

I could go on and on about all this stuff, but I was able to at least tie up some loose ends. I was able to be comfortable in my own skin about a background and being raised, and so forth, which was extremely awkward.

So, I get to Rutgers and the baggage that I was carrying with me was, in some ways, a plus; in a lot of ways, a minus. My freshman year at Rutgers was in the survival mode. I didn't know if I was going to make it, but I did.

SI: This was something that weighed on you when you were younger.

EB: Still weighs on me.

SI: Still weighs on you.

EB: Still weighs on me. I deal with it. It's the type of thing of [where] you can be angry at some people when you're a kid, your anger is different than when you're an adult, when you're angry. What I have to do is just bury some of that stuff and not let it consume my thinking and all that, but it's always there.

I don't think a day goes by where some part of the story rears its ugly head and it'll always be there. It's always there. I look at it that maybe some of the experiences that I had back then, even though they were pretty rough, helped me out, helped me cope with a lot of stuff.

So, what I try to do now is overcompensate and be very positive. I like to take negatives and turn them into positives. I've done that at New Brunswick a lot, because that was a hotbed of negatives. I think I did a real good job when I was at New Brunswick. The kids rewarded me immensely.

You have intrinsic rewards; you have extrinsic rewards. Well, I've gotten my share of extrinsic rewards, but the key would be the intrinsic rewards. Those are the ones you feel inside, that nobody gave you that reward, that was just a feeling you have that leaves you with a positive attitude about life and keeps you keeping on, that type of thing.

So, I've had a ton of intrinsic rewards. I pass that message along to other people. So, I've turned a lot of negatives into positives. That's the way I look at it, but that gives you the background.

SI: Yes, I want to just follow up with some of that and unpack some of it. You mentioned this period between when you were born and when you were eight, moving around a lot, a lot of

(sounds like) turmoil. Give me more of a sense of that period, what it was like for you, even the everyday. Would you have people watching you?

EB: It's funny you asked that. I told you my mother was scrambling for work, waitress here, waitress there. That was her main line of work. I can remember nights when I was left alone. I can remember nights when there were babysitters, teenagers. I can remember nights when I was left alone where the bully in the neighborhood [was in the picture].

We were on a backstreet in Williamstown, near the swamp. There's an ice hockey rink there now. We lived next-door to the Hendersons. The Hendersons were a very interesting family. They had a very interesting house, dinky, sort of rundown.

The place we were living in was cleaner and neater. It was, I guess, a duplex. We were on one side and some distant relative was in the other side, some elderly couple. I really don't remember them at all, but it was very narrow. We had bedrooms upstairs.

I used to go out at night, and I must've been like maybe three, four years old. There was this guy in the neighborhood, Rusty Lee. Rusty Lee was older. He was like ten, eleven, twelve, something like that. His mother was a single mother raising a whole mess of kids.

He could go out and go anywhere and do anything he wanted any hour of the night. So, he'd round up all the kids in the neighborhood, maybe four or five, six of them. We'd go out and we'd raid neighbors' properties and do mischief.

One guy in the neighborhood had a hen house. So, we used to sneak in it. I loved the fake eggs that you put in the nests. They were made out of glass or something like that. I thought they were so keen. So, I used to take those, have a pocket full of those.

I thought it was great. My mother's away at work, nobody's babysitting me and I can sneak out and come back into the house. Luckily, I survived it. Rusty Lee did not. Rusty Lee, when he got to be about thirteen or fourteen, had got in an argument with his mother.

They had on their porch a clothes washer, with the ringer thing like this. He wrestled her to the ground and picked her up and put her hand and arm through the ringer of the washing machine. They hauled him away to a juvenile delinquent center and we never saw him again.

So, there went our ringleader. That was my introduction to tough kids. I think that's one reason why I liked Bloomfield, because there was some tough kids there, but, as I say, it was less than a year. I think that was around third grade time.

So, when I got to Ridgewood, then, I had to make new friends all over again. Ridgewood was different. That's a milquetoast town, all affluent, and so forth. We were on the east side of town, which, in Ridgewood, was the "poor" side of town, but everybody was doing pretty well as far as I could tell. Anyway, that's just like, when I was a kid, that was one of the experiences.

Another experience was the Mohawk Indian that I told you about. He was a carpenter for Treadway Inns. Treadway Inns had the Williams Inn, but they also had some down in Florida. In the winter, he used to go down to Florida and worked down at the Treadway Inns there.

I don't know if you know about the Mohawk Indians, but they're not afraid of heights. They used to hire Mohawks to be up on the skyscrapers when they were building them in New York. He did a lot of roof work for the Treadway Inn, wasn't afraid of climbing and this and that. So, I admired him for it. I mean, he was really a character.

Anyway, my mother decides, "We'll go down to Florida, okay, and I'll look for work there." This was preschool. So, again, we're talking about maybe I was three, four, five, in that area. I can't really keep track of the time at that age.

So, she gets us on a bus; turns out I have the mumps. So, I'm really in agony. It was horrible. I was miserable. I get down there, and then, we're at the beach. For some reason, she's sunbathing or whatever, I'm around, and so forth. I'm getting this burn, like really bad, but I don't know it at the time. Then, the next day, I was really in pain. I had severe sunburn. So, my experience in Florida was horrible.

I don't know if she went down there to see if my father was down there or not, because, remember, he's on the Dodgers. Around '45, '46, '47, they're going down to--I think it's Vero Beach or close to it--where the AAA team was doing their spring training, because I remember there were guys who, when we were at the beach, were coming and flirting with my mother (didn't know it was flirting at the time) and carrying me into the water and holding me in deep water and all that, and then, bringing me back.

I remember three guys, and they all seemed to be big and muscular and all that. So, I don't know, it wasn't my father, but it could've been some other players, I don't know.

Anyway, we were in Florida for that time. For me, that was a bad experience. I didn't like that at all. Then, Ohio, we were living in an apartment. It was a house and we were up on, I think, the third floor. It was not in good shape. I remember, vividly, ants crawling all over the sink, and so forth, like that.

I remember going to school there and where we went, my mother, for some reason or other, was saying, "You use this as your last name, use that," depending on the relatives we were around. Her sister was out in Ohio. That's why we went out there.

So, at a time I was using the name Douglas, which was in the family--the Barretts and the Douglasses married--I remember using that. I remember using the name Barrett, the last name, learning how to spell, that sort of thing. So, in growing up, for some reason or other, names seemed to be significant to me.

That was a carryover to do genealogy and [to] make up names of characters that I have in my novels, my stories. So, that has always stuck with me, and the meanings of the names. What does the name mean? So, then, you have a character who acts a certain way and it might be a

play on the name that the person is using, that type of thing. So, those are some of the experiences that I had.

SI: Just to clarify, did you ever meet your natural father?

EB: No, never.

SI: Did you ever correspond?

EB: I tried. What I got was a letter saying that, "I have feelings, too," and talking about the weather, but never revealing anything, no details or anything like that. As I understand it, he called my mother after I had tried corresponding and that put an end to any letter writing.

She told me, "You're going to cause a lot of trouble and you're going to be in trouble if you pursue this. Don't do it." What I did pursue was, my grandfather that I was named after was living in a rest home. This was in my later twenties, when I was researching, and so forth.

So, I found out what rest home he was at and I called. They put him on the phone. Now, he was suffering from dementia or something like that. We had a wonderful conversation, and he ended the conversation, "Well, this phone call's costing you a lot of money. I think I'd better say good-bye." So, we said good-bye.

It wasn't long after that, maybe months went by, that he passed away. So, that was bittersweet. A lot of this stuff is bittersweet. So, I was able to talk to him. I was able to get one letter from my natural father, but that was a dead end. That didn't lead [to anything] because I suggested in my letter that we meet.

I found out, much later, that he had been to reunions at Williams College. So, he was on the East Coast. He loved fishing, he loved hunting, that type of thing. He had gone on some jaunts up in Canada, so forth. He had a summer place in Montana that the third wife got. She lived up there.

I believe she's passed away, but I didn't keep track of her. She was very friendly, very nice. The others, as I say, were somewhat distant, but, anyway, those are some experiences from that time period, when I was still a Spaulding, but didn't know him.

SI: Wow. Did you get along with your stepfather?

EB: It was an interesting experience. He came from that Protestant [work] ethic thing. He was a stickler for doing the right thing. "You do this because this is the proper thing to do." He was into the Sunday school thing. He was an elder in the Presbyterian Church. My mother, many years later, when they moved to Brielle, she joined the Presbyterian Church.

Turned out, I was able to get my baptismal certificate; turned out I was baptized in a Catholic church, St. Patrick's, up in Williamstown. My wife and I visited there, but, anyway, I had the baptismal certificate and that had my name on it, so the trip was worth it.

Then, let me see, where was I? I was talking about my stepfather. I admired him. I always thought, "Gee, this guy's awful young." As it turned out, when I finally found out the truth, fifteen years older than me--so, he's like a guy who's my father who's acting like an older brother, somebody to look up to, follow, that type of thing.

All these kids came along, "Boom, boom, boom," one right after the other. So, I was like the built-in babysitter. So, I played along with this role. He was a big one on chores, had a lot to do, a lot of chores you had to do. My first allowance was a quarter. Then, when I got older, it was fifty cents, but he was real tight with money. He got a job with Retail Credit as a credit investigator in Paterson. Then, he was made a manager and he had to commute to Newark.

By that time, we were in Ridgewood. So, he had part-time jobs, too. He was a volunteer fireman and he was doing this church work. So, I admired him for his get-up-and-go. He was really good.

My mother was a strange bird. She never got her driver's license, refused to work. She would never work again. I would assume it's because of all the bad experiences she had trying to find work and the work that she was doing. So, she was a stay-at-home mom, take care of the kids.

She would demand a vacation. He'd come through with an idea for a vacation. We'd get all the critters in the car and we'd go. He was good as far as, when he was around, you knew he was around and he was involved in your thing.

So, I liked him in that respect, but the thing is, as I got older, I was getting the sense of, "I'm different than the other kids. I'm not really exactly treated as warmly, etc., as they are." As I look back on it, I can understand that now, but, at that time, like when I'm getting in my teenage years and all that--and, at that time, you're looking to be independent anyway. So, things were working out, taking their natural course, but with all these wrinkles involved.

Then, it was very awkward at the adoption thing, very awkward. It was awkward for them, it was awkward for me. Then, he's the one that talked me into going to college, because I wanted to join the military. The Vietnam War hadn't really started percolating yet or anything like that.

So, I'm admiring him all the way through and things are going great. The kids all came out okay. So, I think he did a good job under the circumstances. He did a good job. My mother didn't interfere too much. I mean, he was the one that was running the show and giving us direction and that sort of thing.

So, I think, overall, there were some things that happened later in life, especially when he remarried. Then, that lady passed away and he remarried a third time— very controversial in the Belding Family.

What was going on behind the scenes when he was married to my mother that we didn't know about until years, years later, we didn't know about her being ten years older than she really was until her funeral. The minister mentioned it.

See, I was baptized a Catholic. I was supposed to be a Catholic, judging on the Barretts and all that. They were Irish all the way, Irish Catholic, but I was raised a Presbyterian. I even taught Sunday school. Before I went to Rutgers, I was teaching Sunday school.

He was the one who was pushing the idea of college. At the time I was looking at colleges, he drove me down to Trenton State, drove me to--what is it? there's a Fairleigh-Dickinson Campus and there's another university--oh, Drew University, and Rutgers.

What I did was, I got accepted at all three, but that was a year after I graduated from high school. I was one of three boys in the Ridgewood graduating class that didn't go to college. Now, a lot of the Rutgers boys attended but dropped out, for one reason or another. There was one school--it would be like a for-profit college now--out in Iowa. The real flunky guys from Ridgewood would go out to this school to matriculate.

So, at the time, he says, "Well, your scores on the SAT weren't really that good. Why don't you work for a year?" because I was a rather immature guy. I was not a mature senior in high school. One of the reasons was, I was like a year younger than all the kids in the thing. For some reason, they put me into third grade when I got to Ridgewood, when I should've been in second grade, okay, something like that, because of my age. They had this age cutoff thing.

So, I could afford to spend a year. I didn't care one way or the other. So, I worked in Paterson. I started working clerical work at Retail Credit. I took math and science again in a walk-up prep school called Jersey Prep, blue-collar all the way. All the guys in there were from blue-collar families and all that. So, it turned out I got the highest SAT scores of all the kids at Jersey Prep. That got me a scholarship at Rutgers--what did they call it, a Jersey Scholarship?

SI: A State Scholarship?

EB: State Scholarship. I got a State Scholarship and then decided that I was going to go to Rutgers. The Trenton Campus was a mud bath. I mean, it was really bad and we didn't like it at all. Drew was fine, except it had the religious thing going on, Methodist, I believe. So, I settled on Rutgers.

SI: Before we get into Rutgers, tell me a little bit about your schooling. Particularly as you got older, getting into high school, what stands out about your education?

EB: At Ridgewood?

SI: Yes.

EB: Okay. Ridgewood High was interesting in that I was uncomfortable at Ridgewood. It was very socially competitive. The girls, they dressed a certain way. There was a certain Ridgewood look, the cashmere sweaters, the string of pearls, that type of thing. Graduation was in formal gowns and the boys wore tuxedos, not robes like everybody else, right. So, I felt awkward in this whole experience with Ridgewood.

Now, my stepfather had gone there. When I go in to talk to the guidance counselor, they gave me the oldest guidance counselor. He goes way back, okay. Now, we're only talking about fifteen years' difference, right. So, he would call me John, because that was my father's name, my stepfather's name.

"So, John, what do you think? You ought to join some clubs, and so forth, show that you're socially active. This will look good on your record," and so forth, like this. They were all into appearance.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Okay.

EB: So, anyway, I'm at this high school where it's all one-up-manship and class distinction. So, you had the west side versus the east side. Right away, I was knowing this, coming from Bloomfield and how that was, and then, stepping right into the Ridgewood thing.

Then, elementary school in Ridgewood wasn't as bad as the high school. I had some great experiences going through the elementary and the junior high while I was there, but I was sort of an outsider because I didn't start in kindergarten. I came on board late. You know how that is, where you're not really a townie, you are somebody who is different. Okay, well, it was third grade, but still and all.

So, anyway, I was struggling. At the time, with the *Sputnik* thing, and so forth, the '50s, the deal was, "You've got to be good in math, you've got to be good in science, because this is going to help us," meaning the US and all that.

[Editor's Note: The world's first artificial satellite, *Sputnik I*, was launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957. The symbolic beginning of the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, it sparked a push to better train Americans in math and science.]

I wasn't buying into that, but they had special math programs, just for boys. The girls weren't capable, supposedly, of doing this type of math, okay, statistics, probability, stuff like that. I was doing very poorly in the math. Then, the science, "Oh, you've got to take the physics, you've got to take the chemistry," and all that. That wasn't me.

So, I dropped out of the chemistry completely and I took European history, Modern European history. It was great. I loved it. It was really good, but I was in a class with freshmen. I was a senior at the time, awkward, but it really worked out great. So, I didn't get the chemistry experience. Then, with the math, I got a "D" in that. I just barely passed that. So, by the time I took the SAT, the math part was my undoing.

That's why I ended up going to the prep school, to shore that up. I took the math and I took the science there. Then, I took the SATs and everything was fine. Back in the Ridgewood thing, it was very difficult getting involved in activities, because there was a pecking order. I was on the outside looking in.

Another thing that happened, I was one of the youngest ones in my class. The people who were running the show in Ridgewood, there were several kids who were advanced. They were promoted above their grade level. We had one, (Reed Perrin?), I believe he's a doctor at the Valley Hospital in Ridgewood. Now, he may have retired, but this kid was a genius.

I remember, from junior high, we were discussing Shakespeare, one of the plays. He was asking questions that were way up here and the teacher was struggling to answer his questions. We're way down here, in the bearbaiting ring. He went from eighth grade to Harvard, I think, something like that. We never saw him again after eighth grade. We had (Dickie Bauer?). He was in that genius category, as were some others.

As I say, the girls, a lot of the girls, especially the junior and senior girls, were going with guys in college. They had a "widow's day" in the early part of the school year, where they would dress up a certain way, like with the sweaters, the pearls and all that. They'd wear the ring that the boyfriend gave them. That was the day the boys went off to college, something like that. So, we couldn't compete for those girls, because they were already taken.

Sports was the same way; the school politics was the same way. To give you an example, Huntley Whitaker, III, from the west side of Ridgewood, was running for president of student council. He was running against Gerry Bucci from the east side of town.

I was, of course, backing Gerry Bucci. I thought, "Oh, he's going to make a good candidate. He's really, really good, into sports and all this stuff, and so forth." Huntley Whitaker III was hated by almost everybody. His mother was president of the board of ed.

Mysteriously, Huntley Whitaker, III, wins the election and becomes the student council president. Gerry Bucci doesn't get anything out of it, okay. That always stuck with me, and that was Ridgewood. Status was much more important than what your ability was and what you could actually do.

Then, as far as teachers, I had a great homeroom teacher. They started an experimental course called "Creative Writing." So, you could take your English by doing "Creative Writing." So, I got into it. I was one of the few kids that were picked to go into it.

There was a kid in the class, Brian Cerf, who was way ahead of his time. He was into the Beatnik thing, and so forth. He was a big Jack Kerouac/Allen Ginsberg fan. So, I didn't know anything about this at all. In this class, he's feeding me this stuff, all this underground literature and stuff. The teacher wasn't really into that stuff, but this Brian Cerf and some other kids were into it.

So, I got my exposure to some of the modern Beatniks, the Beat poets and all that, and that really inspired me with the writing. Then, the teacher was really helpful, too. So, I got involved with the literary group--but, again, there was a pecking order in the literary group. If you were in the high, affluent families, you got to be editor of this and do this, and so forth.

So, I was one of the "peasant" literary people in the school. I guess with the radical Beatnik stuff, and so forth, like that, some of that rubbed off on me. So, I brought that to Rutgers with me.

SI: Since you're close to New York, did you ever go in?

EB: I was afraid of New York, still am. That's another interesting story. Remember I told you about, in Williamstown, going out, a little kid, with this gang and stuff like that? Well, we had a gang in Ridgewood, okay. We used to play hooky from school.

There were a couple of times where we got on the train and we took a train to Hoboken, took the ferry across to New York, walked around a little bit, got scared, came back. This is in elementary school; we were like fifth grade, fourth grade.

In order to pay for the train thing, what we did was, we went behind the supermarket up in Ridgewood, which is by the train station, got bottles, soda bottles and all that, brought them around to the front of the supermarket, went in and got deposit money for the bottles that they had already put in the back of the store. [laughter] That paid for our way there.

Then, we used to go up to Suffern, New York, on the railroad thing. We were playing hooky and our parents didn't know. That's another great thing about my stepfather. He liked this idea of us just going off on our own, exploring from doing this, and so forth. My mother was real upset about it, when she found out about it, but that was just another example different parental perspectives.

Anyway, the Ridgewood experience was, again, a mix of some bitter memories, some sweet memories. I had a crush on a girl. She was in the homeroom. As I say, the creative writing teacher was also the homeroom teacher, Herbie Ogden. They called him "the Penguin." A lot of kids didn't like him at all. I thought he was great.

So, I had some very good teachers at Ridgewood. I had some very bad teachers at Ridgewood, and some of them were in the Math Department. I think that's a problem I had with the math. I'm not going to blame it on anybody--maybe I just didn't have a feel for it--but I didn't have real good teachers in that area.

Again, you had classes--your class functioning at this level, class functioning at that level. It was interesting. In some of the ones, like in the social studies, in the history classes and all that, the teacher (and this happened in a science class, too) would pair me up, because you know how you have the desks where you have two kids at one long desk, would pair me up with one of these kids who was promoted over their grade level.

I was to mentor that kid, because that kid might be twelve, or eleven years old, that type of thing, and be a sophomore in high school. I can remember being in three classes where that took place. The thing that burned me was, that kid would get an "A" and I'd get a "B," and I'm mentoring that kid.

I didn't say anything, because, to me, at Ridgewood High, when you got a "B," that was good enough--be satisfied with that. So, my grade average, because of the math and science, was not that great, but I had the "As" and "Bs" in the English and Social Studies. So, I knew which direction I was headed in.

Then, from the Sunday school teaching, I thought, "Teaching's pretty much fun. I think I'll try that." When I got to Rutgers, I was dividing up my concentrations with history and with teaching, education courses.

SI: Did you play baseball for the school?

EB: For Rutgers?

SI: For Ridgewood.

EB: No, not Ridgewood, no. See, I had a problem with that. I was on the track team because I was so fast. Running track, the spring track, was when they had the baseball. I could have been on the baseball team, but, at that time, all the cool guys--again, the status thing, so forth--they were going for the baseball, not the track team. I didn't have the confidence.

My stepfather was not big in promoting the sports, either. He didn't really have that background or anything like that. I didn't know about my natural father's background, but I had done pitching, like in Little League and all that. So, I was pretty proficient in baseball, but not outstanding. So, I went for the track, because I could do better there. Then, I got injured, my hip and my foot, and so forth. So, I messed up the track thing.

That was not a good experience for me. So, sports-wise in high school was not that great, but, when I graduated from high school, I started playing softball. I could do windmill pitching and I was very, very good. I was working in Paterson and playing for teams in the Paterson/Montclair area. Ace Motors was paying me to pitch. So, that was a great experience.

I'd go to Rutgers and I'd hear all this stuff about, "If you got paid to play a sport, then, you can't play in the amateurs, because you're not an amateur anymore," but I kept that a secret. I didn't tell anybody that--but, at that time, you didn't have boys softball or anything like that. I don't even think Douglass had a girls softball team at that time. So, I was doing Industrial League softball.

I'd go to Rutgers and the only thing available was the baseball team. My arm for throwing overhand was messed up. My arm for throwing underhand was fine, but you can't throw underhand in baseball. That won't work.

So, I decided to go out for manager. So, a lot of the guys on the team, especially the guys from Ridgewood, like Bob Wilkes and all that, said, "Why aren't you trying out for the team?" "I don't think so. It's not worth the effort, because I'm not that good at pitching and I don't know what other--maybe first base, I don't know. I'll be comfortable with managing."

So, as it turned out, Matt Bolger was the coach at Rutgers at the time. He's a football guy, but they needed a baseball coach. Murph Stang was the trainer and Mike Stang was a good friend of mine. Mike was on the team. He was a little younger than me. Future New York Mets coach, Jeff Torborg, was on the varsity team at the time.

So, freshman year was great. I was manager, everything was going fine. I get into the varsity and they already had Bobby Fay; he was the manager. So, I was the assistant manager. That's my first experience with Matt Bolger. Matt was a lot of hot air and he did a lot of bluffing as far as the coaching is concerned, because, like I say, he was a football guy and not really a great baseball coach, but we hit it off pretty well.

So, my sophomore year, he was doing most of the batting practice pitching. I said, "I could pitch." He said, "Okay, fine." So, then, I started batting practice pitching. I was pitching almost every day, pitching, pitching, pitching.

It got to a point where Matt was saying, "We ought to put you into a game." I was thinking, "I don't know if I can do this," because I was worried about--I really didn't know. So, I was stalling on it. I said, "I don't think so. I don't think I'm ready."

So, my senior year comes around. He calls me into the office and he says, "Eddie, it's time we got you into a game." So, he's going to set this all up and everything. He says, "Oh, by the way, I want you to tell Roger Kalinger that he's not going to be starting," because he was in a slump.

Roger Kalinger was the football quarterback at the time, had the records at the time for number of passes and all that. He was well-known to me. He was in my class. So, it was his senior year. He's telling me that I have to tell Roger that he's going to be benched.

I told Matt, I says, "Matt, that's your job. It's not my job." I walked out and I never came back. So, that blew my chances of pitching in a game. I had already gotten my letter in baseball.

The irony is that I pitched in the old timers' games, when they have the get-together with the alumni and all that. I'm on the site--you see me throwing out the first pitch--but, in the first old timers' game I was in, it was the odd years against the even years.

I got to pitch and I did okay. I knew I could handle it, but my arm was really bad at the time. So, I might go to two or three batters and that would be it. My shoulder would be messed up. I never had it corrected or anything like that.

As it ended up, I played softball until I was eighty years old and played for different leagues, different age cutoffs and all that. So, my experience in ball was long, rewarding, contentious every once in a while. It was all that you would anticipate.

Whereas my natural father, when he was quoted (and I got this from my uncle), he said it was like (his experience playing professional ball was like) being on a meat rack. You were just property and you were moved here and there. You did this, you did that. He was very bitter about his experience.

He never made it to the majors. He missed Jackie Robinson by one year, because his last year was '45 and Robinson came in in '46. My thing was, because softball lasted so many years, so many years, and I look back on the Rutgers thing, it was good. It was good.

[Editor's Note: Jackie Robinson played for the Montreal Royals in the 1946 season. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball when he debuted for the Brooklyn Dodgers.]

I'm glad it worked out that way, but I wasn't going to be the fall guy for Matt Bolger. I never told anybody about it. This is the first time I've shared it with anybody, never told anybody. Roger doesn't know about it, Bob Norton doesn't know about it. He was the catcher at the time.

I just thought it was bad. First of all, I didn't think Roger should be benched. Second of all, I looked at myself as a teammate--to put a teammate in that thing, that I've got to tell him that he's going to be benched and they're going to put somebody else in, I didn't like that at all. So, that was the baseball experience.

SI: Do any experiences from the Industrial Leagues stand out? I've heard about those in an earlier era. What was it like playing in those leagues?

EB: That's where I got my first major injury, yes, Ace Motors. I was playing for another team at the time. We were playing Ace Motors and they were tops in the league, Paterson thing. I was pitching and a slugger gets up. A lot of the guys are sluggers in your industrial, fast-pitch league, all upper-body strength, barrel-chested, muscles-on-muscles. The idea was to hit homeruns. Okay, well, this guy could blast them.

So, I had the attitude of, "I can strike out anybody." I couldn't, but I had that attitude. So, I'm pitching to him like I'm going to strike him out and he hits a line drive. I had my glove, okay, my glove's on my right hand and I finished my pitch and I'm leaning forward. The ball comes and hits me right in the ribs. I didn't go down right away, because it bounced off my ribs.

I could still make a play to first base. I bent down to get the ball--and that's when I fell down. From my knees, I was throwing to first base. It never got there, because I collapsed. They brought me to the bench.

I never was knocked out with it, but I was in pain, I was in shock. So, I said, "I can still pitch. I can still pitch." I went out, I tried to pitch, I think maybe one or two batters, and then, I collapsed. So, then, they brought me off the field. They got me in a car--not an ambulance, a car.

They brought me to the family doctor. He gave me a shot (I don't know of what) and taped me all up. He said, "You didn't crack a rib, but you got bruised ribs. You're going to feel a lot of pain." The problem was, something snapped in my shoulder. So, I had two injuries. I was out for the rest of the season.

Other than that, the experiences were good. The thing was, I was hiring myself out as a ringer. A ringer would be, you take the place of somebody. In other words, you take their name. You get paid to play in the game. You get so much per game and you pretend you're somebody else. This is so the team that you're playing for can win the game.

Usually, it's against a better team in the league. So, the inferior teams were doing this a lot. It was not kosher. You weren't supposed to do it, but it was going on a lot. Usually, I wasn't alone. There were other guys who were ringers, too, like a team would get three guys and try to be better. So, I was playing a lot of games where I was pretending I was somebody else. That was an experience, doing dirty things, but getting away with it. [laughter]

At that time, softball, fast-pitch, industrial was a big deal. You had Eddie Feigner going around the country. I don't know if you know "The King and His Court," but he would pitch with three guys on his team. So, there's only four guys on one team. He'd take on teams around, going to town to town, paid handsomely for it.

He could pitch blindfold from second base--this is windmill--and they won. They were like the Harlem Globetrotters, Eddie Feigner, King and His Court. You could look that up, too. I admired him. I thought, "Oh, I want to be Eddie Feigner." I could never be Eddie Feigner. Nobody could ever be him. He was one of a kind.

Anyway, that whole softball field, that whole thing, experience, was great, because I could do the ball thing, like my natural father did, and have a lot of fun with it.

SI: Before you got to college, how would you describe yourself as a consumer of news? Did you know much about what was happening in the world? Did you follow national or world events?

EB: This is before I went?

SI: Yes, before you went away to college.

EB: Ridgewood was a Republican town, very conservative. The only radical stuff I was exposed to was Brian Cerf, who used to go into New York City all the time on his own, and the Beat poets and that sort of thing. That was the only radical thing.

The only other radical thing I was really into was the music. At the time, I was really into--I didn't know it at the time--but it was called discography. That's where you're documenting all the music forms and who's this one in this category and this one in that category, and so on. I was doing all that. That was helpful when I got to Rutgers; that's another story.

Anyway, other than that, it was all conservative. Being a Presbyterian and teaching Sunday school--and my stepfather was a diehard Republican and my step-grandfather was even a more diehard Republican--that was what I was raised in. So, I didn't really question politics, get into any of that stuff.

In the history courses that we took, we never dealt with anything that was really controversial. I remember reading about *Brown v. Board of Education*. I remember, in my experiences in Bloomfield, the black kids not going to the playground, but standing or sitting in the hallway by the window looking over the playground.

[Editor's Note: *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, decided by the US Supreme Court in May 1954, legally desegregated public schools in the United States.]

I would go in or I was late getting out of a class to go to the playground for recess or something like that and I would go by these guys. Some of the times, they were doing acapella in the hallway, for the echo effect and all. I thought, "Oh, this is great. Boy, I'd love to do that. That'd be really great." We'd nod, but no words were spoken or anything like that. I was lily white, but it was like segregated, okay.

There, we're talking about Bloomfield; we're talking about this elementary school. So, when I got to Ridgewood, I think we had two or three kids in our class who were African American. One was into music and he made a career out of it after school. One died early in an automobile accident. I think the other one was a girl and that was it.

There was a very anti-Jewish attitude in Ridgewood. There were a few Jewish families in Ridgewood, not very much at all. So, it was very [regimented]. There was, as I say, a strict pecking order. It was based on wealth and it was based on your family background and your connections, and it had nothing to do with minority groups, okay.

Our attitude, I told you about Gerry Bucci, Italian, and Huntley Whitaker, III, WASP, okay--so, you had that type of thing, "Oh, the Italians; oh, this group," but it was white, white versus white. It was that type of thing. So, that was Ridgewood. That was another reason it was awkward and I didn't like it.

SI: Did you have other jobs in high school?

EB: Working jobs for money?

SI: Yes.

EB: No. What I did was lawn jobs, because my friends in the neighborhood all had paper routes. So, I said, "Well, I'm not going to do a paper route. Everybody's got that covered, right? So, I'll do lawn jobs." Nobody was doing lawn jobs. So, I made money like crazy.

First of all, you got people with money, okay. My allowance I was getting from my miserly stepfather wasn't hacking it. I had hobbies; I was collecting this and that, and I had to pay for them and all that. So, I did the lawn jobs. I got very good at it. I did that all through high school. Then, when I went to the Jersey Prep, I had to work in Paterson. So, then, I had an office job. So, yes, I worked all the way.

When I went to Rutgers, I worked, too, because I transferred from Retail Credit in Paterson to Retail Credit in New Brunswick. So, I had the State Scholarship, I was working part-time while I was going to Rutgers, and so, I was doing okay. I was doing okay, but that's all because of background stuff and getting my act together.

SI: Let's turn to Rutgers. Did you live on campus?

EB: Yes, I was always in the River Dorms. Yes, River Dorm, freshman year, Frelinghuysen, was a survival year--twenty-six guys in the dorm section, nine survived. All the rest dropped out or flunked out, okay. There were guys who were science majors, math majors, whatever, who were doing poorly. They shifted to agriculture. Those are some of the survivors.

So, my experience freshman year was survival. I had to find ways to survive. Language-wise, I took Latin, but I took Latin in high school freshman and sophomore years. So, I didn't have a language for my junior and senior year. This is one flaw in Rutgers' program at the time--I don't know if they cleaned it up--but not only was the Latin offered at Douglass College at eight o'clock in the morning, I had to get up, take the bus, go across town, take the Latin.

It's so much fun to take Latin at eight in the morning, [laughter] so much fun. So, I had to find survival [tools], because I was almost failing it. Meanwhile, in the math, because I had gone to Jersey Prep, I was acing the math. So, I balanced it out. I aced the math. I took physical geography for my science, which was a good move. I balanced it out with the poor grades.

The professor of the Latin was saying, "Well, you need to go to summer school and we have Rutgers in Paterson. You could go there." He always thought I was from Paterson. So, I said, "I'm not going to waste my summer, because I'm going to be playing softball and I'm going to be working. So, I don't have any time for that." So, I hustled.

What a lot of kids were doing with the Latin was getting the "ponies," the books from the bookstore that had all the lessons and all the stuff that you were doing there. So, I don't know how illegal it was, but I used to memorize the ponies and go in and take the exam or whatever. I got passing grades. So, I was able to pull that out, but, like I say, it was survival mode.

My roommate, who thought he was James Dean and would always comb his hair in front of the mirror, he spent a lot of time in front of the mirror. Everybody hated him. Some of the guys in the dorm--this is the one where nine guys survived--okay, they took his bed and all his stuff and hung it over the balcony of Frelinghuysen (it was up on the third floor), because they didn't like him. He was so obnoxious.

He actually broke down and cried during final exams because he hadn't studied--well, yes, he hadn't studied, just fooled around, went out with local girls and all that, combed his hair. He's crying to me to help him with the math.

I said, "I really can't help you with the math. I'm just hanging in there. The only reason I did good is because I had this background before, but I can't give you all the details on it," and so forth. The science, he was all messed up on that. So, anyway, he flunked out.

Sophomore year was great, because I was up on the sixth floor. The guy I was going to room with, he dropped out. We had it all worked out, but he didn't come back. So, I had another strange roommate up there and he didn't last a year. So, I had the room all to myself because they never replaced anybody with it.

By the way, freshman year, that's when they got all these guys in and they had guys in the lounges with bunks there, because they took in more guys than they had room for. The idea was they were going to get rid of a certain number of guys. So, that was always hanging over us, like a nuclear weapon thing or something.

My best friend from Ridgewood, Steve Brague, he signed up late, so, he got to live in the lounge. That was--an elevator comes up, people come in, and so forth, you're trying to sleep. It was a mess. It was really a mess. That's when they were opening up the Heights [now the Busch Campus]. It was all a mud bath up there. Commuting was really a nightmare, back and forth. So, that was growing pains for Rutgers and we were right in the middle of it.

SI: Did they still have a lot of the old Quonset huts and old surplus buildings that they would cram people into?

EB: Yes. When we did our spring training in the baseball, it was in that [place] right next to the old cafeteria, where the old post office was. I think that was for World War II, they had that. We used to operate in there and the lighting was horrible. I got hit in the head with a ball. I didn't even see it coming, but that was an experience.

Anyway, sophomore year, I was in a senior dorm, independent students not in fraternities. They were all seniors except for me. I was a sophomore and they had an independent football team. They were into this and that. One of the guys, Stan Kallman, who was big in the Republican Party, was putting pressure on me to join the Republican Club at Rutgers.

I said, "I'm not interested in this." He says, "Look, you're interested in sports. I'll teach you how to play handball." "Oh, handball, okay." I really never had heard of it. He said, "Yes, that's a real good sport. A lot of people use it for conditioning, to get ready for some other sport, like baseball players." I said, "Oh, that's great."

So, he taught me how to play handball and I joined the Republican Club. The requirement was, I had to go to the meetings, okay. I hated the meetings. They were planning to have Strom Thurmond come to Rutgers, of all people, Strom Thurmond, because he had the big racial attitude thing.

[Editor's Note: Strom Thurmond served as the Governor of South Carolina from 1947 to 1951 and as a US Senator from 1956 to 2003.]

One of my jobs, when he came to Rutgers, was to screen the questions. The Republican Club guys would take the questions from the radicals in the audience and all that, because they were booing Thurmond. We would screen the questions. So, Thurmond would only get the softball

questions, the soft questions. He wouldn't get the real hard questions. It was a bad experience, a bad experience.

So, anyway, I went along with that program in order to learn handball. Stan Kallman was fantastic. He taught me how to play bare-handed with no gloves.

I introduced Steve Brague, my friend, to handball. Steve was an independent at the time. Later, he joined a fraternity, but we were the independent champs in my sophomore year and in my junior year in handball. That means we beat the fraternities, beat everybody.

So, that was a good trade-off. That was a good trade-off. I dropped out of the Republican Club after Kallman graduated. He was a senior at the time, so, it was only one year I had to do that. Then, junior year, sort of a vagueness for me, but that was the year I earned my letter in baseball.

SI: Were you involved in baseball right away in freshman year?

EB: Freshman team, yes, that was good. The freshman team, that was a lot of fun. That was fun. It really didn't matter what you did; you're just grooming yourself for varsity, that type of thing. I didn't have that pressure.

So, I wasn't worried about that, but I'm into statistics and all that. Of course, being manager, you handle the books and such. So, I was in my glory. I was doing fine--and I didn't have to get out in the field and get injured. The only way I could get injured is batting practice, which didn't start until sophomore year anyway.

So, anyway, junior year, I got myself real organized as far as grades. I'm getting the teaching thing, education courses and all that. I go to my advisor. Everybody had an advisor. I say, "I'm sort of interested in Psychology. For my teaching certificate, is Psychology okay to take as a social studies course?"

The advisor said, "Sure, there's no problem at all. You go ahead and take Psychology," because I really wasn't interested in taking political science. The Education Department, I think they were advising you to take Political Science. So, I took my advisor's advice, took the Psychology.

Well, my senior year comes around and senior year was a breeze. I went through that no problem--go up, graduating at the ceremony. In with your diploma is your certificate for teaching. I take it out, "Oh, I got my certificate, great. I can get a teaching job," says I can teach (in New Jersey) History, can't teach Social Studies.

Okay, so, I didn't think anything of it. I had a summer job lined up. That's a totally other story. I go off to the camp, the camp up in New Hampshire. I don't have a job yet. Now, I had applied to all these places, and so forth, but they were all rejecting me because I couldn't teach Social Studies. My certificate was only for History. They want somebody who's versatile and can teach geography and whatever they have.

So, lo and behold, I'm at the summer camp and I get the notification for the draft, for the Vietnam War. It says, "Six a.m., you've got to report." So, I left camp three days early. I didn't finish the regular camp season. There were other guys up there who were counselors who had to come down, too, but they were coming to different places, because these were counselors from all over the country.

So, I've got to go down to Hackensack, be there at six a.m. I thought, "Ooh, I'm early. They're going to take me early. I'll go through that, get out of it, so forth, and I'll be declassified because of my eyes." This is another reason why I didn't pitch, because of my eyesight was very bad. Since then, I've had cataract surgery, when I was much older.

My eyes are very good now, but, back then, I couldn't even see the signals from the catcher. Jeff Torborg would give me a two, give me a one, okay, give me a three--I couldn't see the fingers. I couldn't make the difference out between them. So, he came up with a system of a hand's on one knee or one or the other, that type of thing.

So, I thought I'd be 4-F because of my eyesight. So, I go down and they've got the Hackensack thing. Then, they get you on a bus, they take you to Newark. That's where you get your physical. Some of these guys were pretending to be crazy. They put them in a separate place, that sort of thing.

So, I get to the eye thing and the guy's like this--he's right here and he's operating a machine here and a machine there. So, he's doing two at one time, "Ding, ding, ding, ding," then, he's turning these things. You're looking in and you're supposed to answer these questions.

I can't see for a lick and I'm making it up. I say, "Oh, I see a rabbit running across the thing," and so forth, like that. So, he writes down on both of ours, the guy who's with me, he says, "20/20, 20/20, okay, next," [that sort of] thing. So, my eyesight was, according to them, perfect. I could see myself with a rifle shooting myself in the foot thinking it was a Viet Cong or something.

So, anyway, they're ready to take me. The guys from Ridgewood High who were on the bus, graduated from college or whatever at the same time I did, they're telling me, "Get yourself a job and go back to school, graduate school. They won't take you, at least [not] right away." "What type of work?" I said.

"Well, teaching." He says, "Well, you know they're taking phys. ed. teachers first. You're not a phys. ed. teacher, are you?" "No, no, no. I'm not phys. ed. I'm social studies," but, really, I couldn't be social [studies], I'm a history. So, they say, "Ah, social studies, that's not too good, because after phys. ed., they're taking social studies teachers. If you were teaching math or science, you're going to be the last taken of teachers, educators." I said, "Oh, no."

So, here, I'm trying to get a job in social studies. If I do, then, my chances of getting drafted are very high, okay. There were some people who graduated from Rutgers who did get the social studies certification, because they didn't take psychology, they took political sci. See how it's all connected? They got drafted. I didn't get drafted.

Why? Because when I got back to New Brunswick, I looked in the paper for a job and I signed up at Rutgers for graduate school, history. In *The Daily Home News*, there's a little ad under the want ads, "Typing instructor, Drake College of Business." Drake College of Business was above the State Theater on Livingston Avenue, a walk-in type thing, just like Jersey Prep.

I said, "Ah, I'm in my environment now. This is great." I walk up the stairs. I didn't know if I had a chance at all, because the only typing I took was a semester at Ridgewood High learning how to type. I was typing about forty words a minute, which is nothing.

So, I go up there. The lady who's the director of the school interviews me, asking me questions, all that. She turns around and she grabs these books. I thought she was going to show me some brochures. She says, "Here's your books. You're starting," and she gave me a date, the beginning of September, "You're going to be teaching typing, business English and filing."

"Wow, I got my job," okay. Little did I know that Drake College of Business was also teaching veterans on a rehab program. When the lady found out that I was close to being drafted, she writes a letter to the draft board saying, "Mr. Belding is in an essential job category. He needs an essential job classification, because he is teaching veterans from World War II and the Korean War," and I was. They gave me a job classification, essential job classification.

So, whereas guys who graduated with me who got their social studies certification were drafted--and some of them didn't come back, okay--I was able to float right on through. So, I was not a military person at all. I was not a radical and anti-military, anything like that, but I just couldn't see myself as a soldier.

I was, at that time, a writer, a poet, and poets, if you say, "Go left," they go right; if it's up, down. They're all over the map. So, I just wouldn't be able to exist in that type of environment. Somebody barking orders at me, that's not going to work, not going to happen.

SI: Had you been following news about the war?

EB: Of the Vietnam War?

SI: Yes.

EB: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, that was heavily discussed. I was involved with the teach-ins at Rutgers with Genovese and all that. So, you'll remember that here I was at Rutgers, getting involved with the Republican Party. Then, after those seniors left, that was over.

[Editor's Note: On April 23, 1965, at a teach-in at Rutgers University's Scott Hall, professor of history Eugene D. Genovese declared, "...I do not fear or regret the impending Viet Cong victory in Vietnam. I welcome it." A firestorm of controversy ensued and became a focal point in the 1965 New Jersey gubernatorial race, but Rutgers University President Mason W. Gross, with the support of the faculty, resisted public pressure to dismiss Genovese, on the principle of academic freedom.]

Then, it was all leaning towards the antiwar and anti-this and pro-this. So, I was making a 180-degree turn. By the time I was doing the graduate stuff, I was really into the Civil Rights stuff and all that. So, that was something I've got to thank Rutgers for, opening my eyes to what the real situation was.

Meanwhile, I mentioned Steve Brague. He's trying to get me to join ROTC, because I don't know if you know this, but ROTC became voluntary our freshman year. Before that, it was mandatory. So, he was *gung ho* military and he wanted me to join. I said, "Steve, it's not me. I'm not involved in it." So, he goes through Rutgers. He was one of the ones that transferred to the Ag School, so [that] he could get through Rutgers. He was in a fraternity, he's in ROTC, the whole thing, real *gung ho*.

He's going off to Vietnam. He's got a girlfriend. He marries her. She's pregnant, okay. He goes off. He's in a helicopter, gets shot down, killed, never comes back, leaves a widow who has the kid born. That was sad, really sad.

[Editor's Note: US Army First Lieutenant Edwin Stephen Brague, Jr., was killed-in-action on January 7, 1967, in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. He served in the Second Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division.]

So, I lost my best friend. That motivated me to be on the committee for the Vietnam Monument, which is next to Scott Hall. If you look at it, the first name on there (I think) is Steve Brague and he's my buddy. I was in on that committee. Bob Norton, catcher on the ball team, he headed up that committee and we got together. Class of '65 was big for that monument. We were in the judging of what the monument would look like. That was an experience that was really good.

So, anyhow, as I say, I really came full circle. So, I'm a mixed bag. I have this WASP, conservative, affluent background that I never fully tasted and I have my progressive, liberal, New Brunswick School System, that whole bit, radical liberal stuff going on. So, I've seen it all and I've been involved in it all. I've got a taste of this and a taste of that . . . some bitter, some sweet.

SI: Let me pause for a moment.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

EB: That's good.

SI: Today, we're going to wrap up this session. Next time, we'll come back and talk a little bit more about Rutgers and how your transformation unfolds, and then, get into New Brunswick teaching and all the other aspects of your life. We still haven't gotten to--you can't see this on the recording--but there's a pile of your writings in front of me.

EB: You, at least, can imagine.

SI: We want to talk a bit about that as well. Thank you very much, I really appreciate this first session.

EB: Hey, great. I enjoyed it. My pleasure.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/23/2024

Reviewed by Ed Belding 10/24/2024