

Boylston Memories – Oral Histories

By Judy Haynes

The Boylston Historical Society holds in its collection eight oral histories: transcripts of taped interviews and stories by those who grew up in Boylston. These narratives evoke special memories of life here in a small town. Are you curious to learn what life may have been like in Boylston's 1920s, '30s, '40s, and fifties? Then come into the Historic Town Hall and read one of these special autobiographies: Edith Anderson, Martha "Muffie" Bigelow, Andrew Bunikis, Ruth Coyle, Clifton Gilson) by his daughters, Don Rich, Ken Ware, and John Peterson. The following paragraphs demonstrate some of the wonderful highlights and special events in the lives of these folk which are provided here to demonstrate an idea as to the gems about life in Boylston that can be gleaned through this collection.

Edith Anderson (1916-2011), a lifelong Boylstonian, was interviewed at the age of 88 years in 2004. She had lived with her family, before marriage, in the triple decker next to the Deli on Main Street. Just around the corner stood the Red Barn restaurant where she could waitress conveniently near home. She describes its décor, how it functioned, and the serving style. It stood between the Deli and the Historic Town Hall until ca. 1950s when it was taken down and moved to Skaneateles, New York. From all accounts it was popular and attracted many out-of-town customers. When she married Fred Anderson, the wedding was held in the Red Barn's lovely garden under an arbor built just for the occasion. She loved baking pies and she had a hobby of making dolls from a pattern found in *Dolls to Make* by Edith Flack Ackley. She made several and gave them as gifts to family. She would individualize each doll by changing the garment or dress.



Homemade Doll
Edith Anderson
*Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Collections*

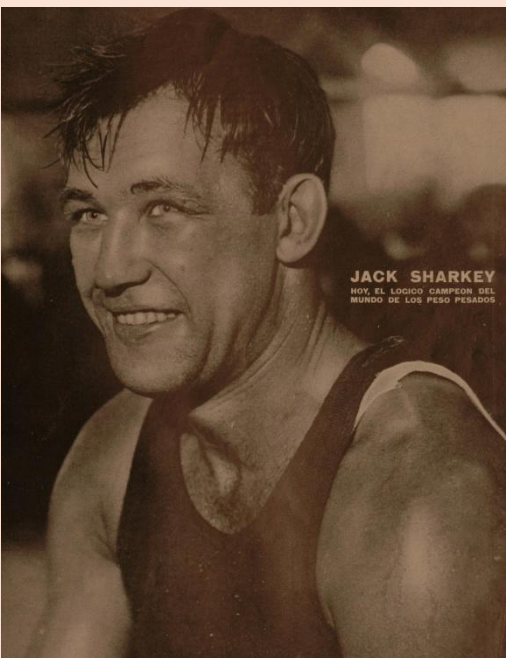


(left to right) Muffie Bigelow, Judy Haynes, Tim Houlihan & Dwight Hastings
*Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Photograph Collections*

Martha "Muffie" Bigelow (1928-2020) was interviewed in 2006 and recalled fondly her 20 years before marriage growing up on the corner of School and Sewall Streets. Her home was a farm that her father owned where he gardened vegetables and flowers as a nursery business. She learned a great deal about carnations, snapdragons, and how to prepare special memorial baskets for Decoration Day (Memorial Day as it is known today). Her early years and working in her father's nursery fit right into married life with Bill Bigelow whose family-owned Bigelow Nurseries in Northborough. Muffie was always active both in Boylston and in Northborough. She recalls a time when parents and teachers were stricter and a teacher nicknamed "Bull Dog," who was never afraid to hit your knuckles with a ruler if you were not attending to your schoolwork at the Consolidated School.

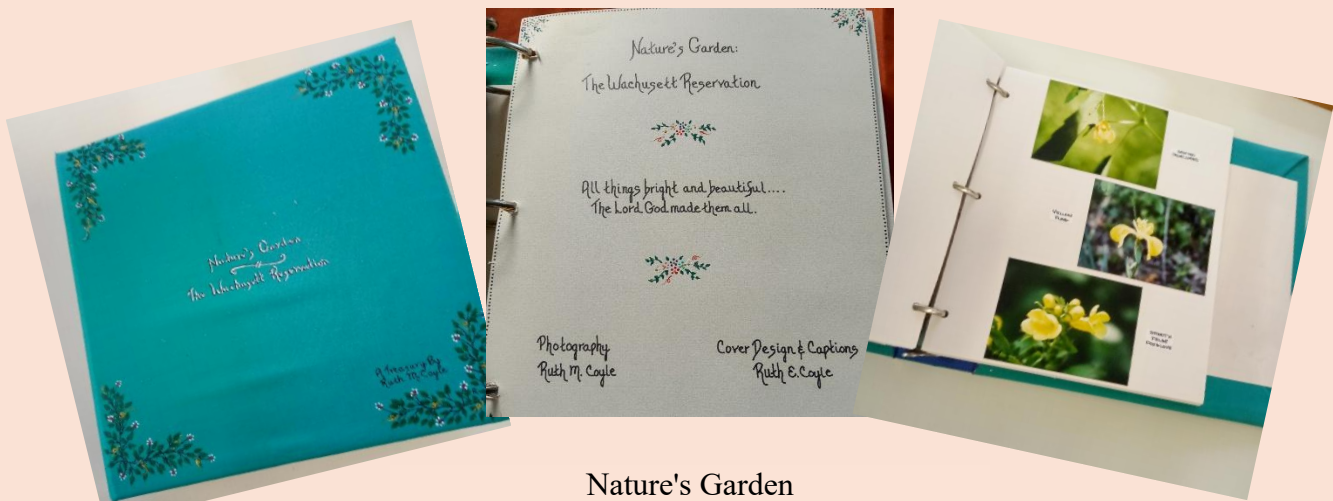
From her porch she and her siblings could see the troops marching to Fort Devens during World War II. Young women were encouraged to write to the soldiers and she tells how the soldiers, as they passed by, threw pieces of paper with their name and address to the girls. Those letters would lift the soldiers' spirits and many wrote diligently. Picking berries, holding a green apple eating contest, with salt of course, and smoking goldenrod leaves and wallpaper were all part of growing up.

Andrew Bunikis (1922-2009) was interviewed at the age of 82 years in 2004. He lived most of his life in Boylston and became very active in town affairs serving as an Assessor. He tells us about Hillside when it was a farm in the 1930s with the Carroll family working the farm and the Carroll brothers as amateur boxers. Boxing champion Jack Sharkey was a friend of the Carrolls and did some of his sparring and training in the red barn behind the John B. Gough House. Andy found this a particularly special time to have met and to have seen in person a future champion.



Jack Sharkey
*Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc
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Ruth Coyle (1918-2011), a lifelong Boylston resident was interviewed in 2005 at the age of 87 years. She lived near the center of town on Scar Hill Road. Her story exemplifies the feelings of a Boylston child, not quite six years old as she watched the Congregational Church fire in 1924. Her mother had just given birth to her sister Betty and witnessed the flames from her bedroom window. Ruth had a love for horses and horseback riding and spent many an hour and day patrolling around the reservoir. She also enjoyed learning about and photographing the variety of wild flowers around the reservoir. An album of all her beautiful pictures is present at our museum for your enjoyment. During World War II she would patrol the path along the water, but never found any sabotage or problem. She did scare off a possible escaped prisoner from Fort Devens, but nothing resulted of her siting and he ran quickly away, gone when others arrived.



Nature's Garden
The Wachusett Reservation
by Ruth Coyle
*Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Library Collections*

Clifton Gilson (1922-2007) life as portrayed by his daughters. On June 6, 2022 two women arrived at the Historical Town Hall carrying a soft fireman’s hat that belonged to their father Clifton Gilson. This history has Gail Gilson Ojala and Sharon Gilson Miller relating their young years in the Morningdale section of Boylston where their father became a Deputy Fire Chief in 1952 under Robert Kimball, who was Chief and whose other trucks were located in the center of Boylston. The Morningdale or western section of Boylston needed, at that time, coverage and the Gilson family home and garage became the housing for the fire phone and the area firetruck. The phone was hooked up and could ring any time in the 24 hours followed by a local siren to announce to the volunteers in the area, it’s time to respond to a fire. The men would come running, jump on the truck, and off they would go to the fire as quickly as possible. Naturally the girls were warned “Stay off the fire truck!” Did they – no, that was no fun, but they usually obeyed. The sisters share stories of that area’s happenings, many of which took place at Morningdale Chapel. They played in and around Mud Pond, Sewall Beach, and had neighborhood friends for play. When old enough to go into Worcester to shop, a bus route left Worcester and went all the way to Clinton. It drove right through Main Street and would stop for their passengers. The sisters had fond memories and a good laugh as they quoted the bus driver who never failed to shout: “Entering Morningdale Center of Activity.”



Boylston Fire Hat
Clifton Gilson
*Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Collections*

John Peterson (1945-). John’s oral history is another full life story and is life as many of us knew it in the 1950s. He was a good athlete, but sports were cut short when he cut his leg with an axe. In the days before cell phones, it was time to be outdoors for hours and sneak a forbidden swim in the reservoir before the local police would catch you. Those were the days to build Go-Karts and go tearing down old Temple Street toward the reservoir, a time when programmed activities were less common, though dances and dance lessons were had at the Town House, the Men’s Club as it was known then. One fun story told: he and his school chums captured as many frogs as they could for biology class. Read all about the “Frogs on the Bus” – what a memorable school ride. This and so much more will elicit your own youthful memories.

Donald Rich (1923-2021) His family had taken on the farm lease at Hillside from owner, George Fuller (1935-1938), after the Carrolls left. Living on a farm meant everyone worked; thus, as a 12-year-old his job was breaking the calves, a job he enjoyed. The Great Depression was on, but they always ate well as the farm provided food enough for good eating. One can get a sense of the buildings and farm layout at Hillside in the 1930s from reading this oral history.

Ken Ware (1938-), was interviewed in 2013 at the age of 75 years. His life story will evoke for you many of the passages of your own growing up. His family lived on land that is now part of the country club, but back then it was farmland and fields and an area of the Stark Farm. His uncle and cousins lived nearby and they spent hours and days together exploring the woods, building a cabin for their own fun and jumping into a nearby stream to cool off on a summer day. He loved cars and at age ten years old he learned to drive an old farm truck. Living along a barely used road, he and his cousins witnessed a driver who would never stop at the STOP sign, which was close to where he and family might be backing out of the barn and get hit. They decided to teach that driver a lesson. Always resourceful, they found and gathered from old cars, nearly 18 horns which they rigged up to blast off when the fellow who never stopped was about to drive by. “Here he comes” yelled a cousin and they turned on all 18 horns. The man was stunned, didn’t know if the cops were coming or what was happening. Never again did he drive through the stop line without a full stop. Ken and the boys always observed any building and construction going on, thus he learned at an early age that he could build houses and it would become one part of his adult career. As a teen he and his cousins, always building something, created a real covered wagon. Once built, they borrowed an old horse named January and had a wonderful summer of 1954 with riding in the wagon around town.

Ken became good friends with the Warren family, who lived far into the woods, and as self-sufficient as they could be. Once again, he learned from them and enjoyed their stories of their lifestyle. Ida Warren told him how she killed an endangered species, a golden eagle. This big bird was attacking her bantam rooster and in order to protect him she pounced on the big bird and choked him. She was scolded by the game warden, but admitted she had no idea what kind of bird she killed. She was just protecting her own property. The Warren family suffered a massive fire with all but Ida surviving, such a tragic story. Ken was always doing good deeds and helped as much as he could following the tragedy. His work cleaning up around town, mowing, clearing trash, and taking care of the grounds at 140 and 70 earned him Citizen of the Year in 2007.

These eight narratives are but a snapshot of the lives and times of the interviewees. Full family stories with more detail of everyday life that included fun as well as serious business of growing up in Boylston in the 20th century is printed for all to enjoy. We invite you to read and learn more in our Fuller Library at the Historic Town Hall, 7 Central Street, Boylston.



Transcriptions of Boylstonians’ Oral Histories
Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Library Collections

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