

WILLINGBORO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

DATE: MARCH 2, 1981
SUBJECT: SIDNEY W. BOOKBINDER
PROJECT COMMITTEE: MARIE GEORGE
MAURICE GOLDMAN
BARNARD SHARROW
HAL VOGEL

S. Bookbinder: And after World War II, we got into the situation of the revival of houseing here in the Delaware Valley, There was...

H. Vogel: Do you mind if we run the tape while you're...

S. Bookbinder: Yes, sure. Fine.

H. Vogel: One can never tell...

S. Bookbinder: Right. That's fine. OK.

M. Goldman: I just turned it on.

S. Bookbinder: That's fine. The...

H. Vogel: You were saying...

S. Bookbinder: Yes. Right after the end of World War II -- for example, I was in the service and I got back -- it was in January of '46, and guys like me having been here all their life immediately got back into the swing of things and participated in community life. Soon you very well realized from your own experience. For example, I lived in Burlington all my life, and I came back to get a house and there wasn't a house to have. I had gotten, I was married while I was in the service. Two of my brothers, the same thing. And none of us could find a place to live. We lived in Burlington all of our lives. So, finally, we started to look. My father -- may he rest in peace -- and my mother started to look and found places for us to live in the next town, Beverly. And this is what happened, and that happened to all veterans coming back. The biggest thing that everybody

hit, no matter where it was in the country -- particularly here in this area that we call the Delaware Valley -- was a great need for housing. There just wasn't anything available. So, many of the veterans had to move away from their hometowns and go out, live in a few little apartments. So, at any rate, getting back into...

H. Vogel: Why do you think there was such a shortage?

S. Bookbinder: Well, of course the main...because of the fact that during the war there was nothing going on (no construction), all these people had gone away to war and many of them -- for example, take my own personal example and my family. There were four grown men, see, and all four grown men went to war. OK? And when they came back three of those grown men were married and couldn't live home anymore. This happened in family after family. And, therefore, it was pretty obvious that nothing was being done. So, at any rate here in this Delaware Valley, the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce formed what was called the Greater Philadelphia-South Jersey-Delaware Council made up of five counties in Pennsylvania and four counties over here. Burlington County was one of them. We had a chamber of Commerce in Burlington; and, of course, I was just a new lawyer starting out and I was involved in a lot of things, and I became the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and the representative to the Greater Philadelphia-South Jersey Council in Philadelphia. And, we met in Philadelphia on a monthly basis. And, out of that came a program of development. There were no such things as planning boards. There were zoning boards in many of these municipalities, but there weren't any planning boards. And, things started and people were starting to

get into the building business, that loosened up and so forth. And, you know, there wasn't any place that, and then people would come to build houses. There weren't any regulations, and so it came into being that we had to have orderly growth and planning boards started to be developed, and then the thing that really kicked off this whole area -- bearing in mind that by 1950, for example, when the census was taken there was 135,000 people in Burlington County. About 1948 things really start to move. How did it start to move? There was an announcement by the U.S. Steel Corporation that they were coming to the Delaware Valley and they were coming up here at Morrisville which is now the Fairless Works. The minute that announcement came in '47, the next thing that we know in this area was that Levitt and Sons were coming to Pennsylvania. And, Levitt came to Pennsylvania and built the Levittown there. In that situation, of course, he built in five municipalities. That started things. Things really started to move in the whole Delaware Valley the minute that those two things happened. Number one, Fairless Works; number two, Levitt to provide the housing that was so badly needed. And that's what really kicked it off. Up to then, it was almost impossible for people. Again, people, like myself and my brothers. One of my brothers couldn't even get a house, so that he came to live with me. We lived together in Beverly because he had -- the one that's a podiatrist -- he had to go to take a brush up course down at Temple, and he lived with me for a period of time. My other brother who is a teacher, he went home and lived with my mother and father. He had a baby, and they finally found a place up in Florence, see. They lived up there for a number of years. So, this is what really kicked it off. And then,

when Levitt came, development started in Pennsylvania, over on this side of the river. Also, because of the very fact of course that the Levitts came with a great track record, having built in Long Island -- by that time Levitt had started right after World War II in Long Island. As a matter of fact, he started just as the war ended in Long Island and built that and that was highly successful, both the cost and a good product and so forth. And so then they came right over to Pennsylvania and when they finished there, then they started to move over here.

M. Goldman: What was the situation in Willingboro in those years prior to Levitt's coming? What kind of a community...

S. Bookbinder: This was strictly farm. This was, as you may or may not know -- the slogan of Burlington County in the days prior to World War II and immediately thereafter, prior to the Levitt years, was "The Garden Gate of the Garden State, Burlington County". And, we produced and harvested the greatest corn and tomatoes and the whole thing in this Willingboro with some of the very best soil ever for garden vegetables. For example, the Waltons -- they had a big farm. Cress Stuart -- he had a big farm. There was Van Scivers -- they had big farms. Busby -- he didn't have such a big farm; he had a small farm. That was some of the people. Charlie Harrison, for which Harrison Drive is named. Oh, let's see...

M. Goldman: Did the ownership of large amounts of land make these people leaders in the community?

S. Bookbinder: Well, then let me see, there was a ... the population here was about eight hundred. We're talking about -- at that time, you see, Rancocas was included in Willingboro

and the Hookstra's, and Joe Berkley and some of those people were active in community affairs and in politics. For example, a guy by the name of Joe Berkley who was from the Rancocas area, he was like Secretary to the Board of Taxation at the County level. Cress Stuart was the kind of a guy that.. His family before him. His father was a doctor--a veterinarian. An old traditional family from way, way back. Cress Stuart was a county community leader very active in agricultural affairs. Cress Stuart was on the Milk Board. He was the state president of the State Board of Agriculture. Very active. So far as clubs were concerned, there was no such thing as clubs. People from Willingboro, like Cress Stuart was in the Beverly Rotary Club. Cress Stuart and I were charter members in the Beverly Club, and I think Cress Stewart was charter president, if I'm not mistaken, in the Beverly Club, either the first or second president. County of Burlington was not founded until 1825 -- and the county itself extended into

B. Sharrow: I have one problem here. You mentioned Rancocas. And I know that Levitt was displeased with the fact that he had to deal with something like four or five municipalities in other places and he was instrumental in having Rancocas separated from Willingboro. But, since they constituted one township at that time, why did he feel it necessary to separate them?

S. Bookbinder: Well, here is why. You've got -- you had a situation, of course, we're running a little ahead of the story. First of all, when he started to acquire land here, it was done, again, it was done, there was no public announcement. It started in, I guess, late '52 and early '53, prior to the time that I was being Solicitor. It started with someone going out and soliciting land. No one knew who it was. There was a lot of speculation, there was, and

it was done in the name of a person who was a nominee for Levitt. The reason for that was he learned, basically the hard way over in Pennsylvania, that as soon as the name Levitt was in, the prices went up and it made it almost impossible for him to function in that kind of an economy. And, so, it became necessary to acquire land before it was officially announced. The, when it was officially announced, he had acquired most of the land. But he could not do very much business -- his nominee couldn't do very much business -- in the Rancocas area because that was a built up area and it had an historic background and some of those people that was the residential area of Willingboro. Now, historically, you've got to bear in mind also that back, we'll say in the founding days of Burlington County, there were...back we'll say in 1681 when the courts -- bear in mind that 1681, while that's the court date, the County of Burlington was not founded until 1685 -- and the county itself extended into Mercer County and the county as far as Camden County -- the Pennsauken Creek was there, but it counted all the way into Mercer and parts of Monmouth County -- and the Municipalities throughout this whole broad area and also Ocean County, was only eight municipalities. Willingboro -- what we call Willingboro now -- consisted of what is now Delanco, Beverly, all of Willingboro, great portions of what is now Burlington Township and so forth. And so, Willingboro, as we know it as we knew it in '52 and '53, still had Rancocas in it with this particular area and about six hundred acres that was chopped off and put in Burlington Township (and some taken from Burlington Township), and of course, with Rancocas being put into Westampton.

So, what Levitt really wanted -- the long and short to your answer is.. the answer to your question is simply

that Levitt wanted raw land.

B. Sharrow: I see.

S. Bookbinder: Raw land. That's all he wanted was raw land.

B. Sharrow: What...

S. Bookbinder: And one of the great hassles of all time was, of course, when the act was introduced to the legislature and we had a public hearing because the people...(There was a mixed bag there, as far as Rancocas, because certain people in Rancocas wanted to get out and certain people wanted to stay in.) And so, but nevertheless, the legislation went through.

H. Vogel: Why was it necessary to -- or why did he feel (obviously, he was the one who precipitated it.) Why did Levitt feel it was necessary to parce Rancocas from Willingboro when what he was buying was parcels of land and not townships?

S. Bookbinder: Well, here's why. His experience in Pennsylvania was that he had to deal with five townships, and as a result, if you go through, the answer is pretty obvious. If you ride through over there, and ride through here, it is like an entirely different world, you see. Here, he was determined to acquire 5,000 acres of raw ground and build a community called -- of course, he had hoped -- that it would be Levittown -- that would be a self-contained community of itself in its educational processes, because he had big plans when he first began. He was going to build a college here and the whole bit -- And, indeed, it worked out to be, I think, outstanding and he would have had a lot of resistance from people who -- there was a

resistance about change -- I mean there was, you know, people -- naturally, the big buck was more important to people sold out -- but there were some people who were holding out for bigger bucks. And, then there were some people who attempted to resist the change, and they did it by holding up the sale of it, that's all.

B. Sharrow: And there was, perhaps, a little more opposition to Mr. Levitt coming in in the more urbanized Rancocas area rather than the agricultural area.

S. Bookbinder: That is correct.

H. Vogel: What were the politics involved in the parcing? What was the -- shall we say, the imaginations -- the intrigue? After all, he was an outsider. How did he manage this feat?

S. Bookbinder: What he.. In coming in.. he was able to get together enough, before he made the announcement, enough land that he could move into the thing. That was.. That was.. He learned through the experience in other places them.

H. Vogel: What to you mean by "moving into the thing"?

S. Bookbinder: What I mean is simply that by acquiring land sufficient to go ahead with his project, he didn't have to take such a calculated risk and run into the problems that he ran into over in Pennsylvania. And, dealing with one entity and one group of people, and so forth -- this is what -- So, when he acquired the land and it was then known what he was going to do or attempting to do, it then had to be necessary to develop a relationship with the governing body, come and present his plans, and start moving and building a town. And so, he had only one group to deal

with, one municipality to deal with, one board of education on how to build the schools, build roads, build sewers. And, you know, no builder in the entire nation perceived -- I mean never developed -- the way this man developed.

Sharrow:

We're very interested...

Vogel:

Rancocas, though, did not have a separate voice in this decision, did it? It was a part of Willingboro.

Bookbinder:

Well, what do you mean -- separate voice? They were part of Willingboro. That's right. No, they didn't have a separate voice.

Vogel:

You said he wanted to deal with one municipality, but he already was dealing with one municipality whether Rancocas...

Bookbinder:

Well, that's true. But, again, the point that I make in relation to why he wanted to deal with. He didn't want to have to be dealing with acquiring and tearing. You know, the big thing, the people in Rancocas like the farmers here -- the farmers here, the people were a people who farm. You know, this was attractive to them to be able to -- most of these people had spent their lifetime here and they were ready to pack it up, so to speak.

Vogel:

Why?

Bookbinder:

Well, very few... those who, let's put it this way, very realistically, the bucks that were...they never heard of those kinds of bucks, OK? And, indeed those who wanted to continue farming did, in fact, go over to Tabernacle, buy farms with what they -- and still had quite a few

bucks left, OK? These people were good business people. It was a business deal.

Sharrow:

How did that come about? Usually it's the seller who sets the price for land.

Hookbinder:

Uh huh...

Sharrow:

And, did they always get exactly what they asked for?

Hookbinder:

Well, Levitt came in and gave them figures that, there's an old saying, you know. A deal that they couldn't refuse.

Sharrow:

I see.

Hookbinder:

He didn't come in to try to chisel anything even though it wasn't ... he came up with numbers that people just couldn't refuse. And those who were a little bit... for example, there was a family, Hookstra. Bill Hookstra, he was a man already who had been here.

ogel:

How do you spell that?

Hookbinder:

H-O-O-K-S-T-R-A. He was the township clerk. And, he had raised his family here and some of his family had moved to Florida. He was a man close to 70 -- 66-67. It was just right for him. It was just the greatest thing that could have happened to him. He had done very well as a farmer, and at the end of the road here's somebody who wants to come in and give him more money than he ever thought existed in the world. Nobody came in and, say,

tried to buy something for sheap. He did not operate that way.

ogel:

Where was the opposition?

ookbinder:

Well, the opposition came from. Well, for example, some of the people -- a number of people -- came in here that weren't farmers, and they came here because they wanted a nice piece of ground with farmland. And, then there were others who wanted to stay here, you see, and the opposition came. Human jealousy started getting in the picture. This guy got this much an acre and the next guy, 'cause he held out a little longer, he got a little bit more; and the fdirst thing you know, some of the people who sold first. Let's put it this way. Most of the people that sold first, very frankly were people who really like stayed here. Johnny Walton. I think Johnny Walton's father sold -- I think that was the first farm up where...let's see, that would be about where March Realty is. That was their farm, right there on 130. Some of the people sold a little bit later like Charlie Van Sciver. They held up. They drove a hard bargain. He had to pay more bucks. Bigger farms. There were people that come here. For example, a resident here...Ransom Company that deals with heavy equipment...Pers Ransom lived here, you see.

harrow:

And he still has property.

ookbinder:

Yes, he still has property.

ogel:

Is that an estate or a farm?

Bookbinder: Well, it was an historic home that he came here and bought it and renovated it and he had land and it was a tax shelter kind of thing, and he loved it here. He just loved it here. And, as a matter of fact, he really tried to resist the whole thing. Again, it was a business deal. He was a business man, you see.

Sharrow: Is this when that summer colony came to an end -- it this about the time?

Bookbinder: You are talking about Martin's Beach?

Sharrow: Yes.

Bookbinder: Yes, Martin's Beach was another area that we had here. And, it was owned by an individual who at about that time had already passed away. A lot of people had bought land down there and some of them never did sell. Some of them are still here. And most of those people.

Vogel: ...still there. Where?

Bookbinder: You know where the Willingboro High School is? Well, down to the beach there are some homes that are...that people owned that didn't sell to Levitt. Didn't really.

Vogel: At the creek.

Bookbinder: At the creek.

Sharrow: Did you ever do any swimming there during your lifetime?

Bookbinder: At Martin's Beach? Yes. Yes. I did. I did also swim at Olympia Lakes.

Vogel: How did he sense the mood? Or, if there were two camps, where would you say that the camps were centered? Assuming there's...

Bookbinder: Well, the camps dissipated as soon as somebody got the bucks they wanted.

Vogel: The people...

Bookbinder: The concept. Well, basically, I suppose, the basic resistance was to change, you see. Change to Burlington County. Again, I give you the statistics--135,000 people. Today, if you read the paper, I think Burlington County is 382,000. As a result of Levitt coming, all of these other communities started developing. You never had any development in Delran, Cinnaminson, Mt. Laurel, all of those communities started to develop. Developers started to come in and buy land. Even a place like Burlington City where there is very little land. Developers even came in there. And, of course, Burlington Township. And industry started coming. As a result of...remember what I told you at the beginning...as a result of this Fairless Works. A combination of things happened. Industrial growth, more jobs, more people needing housing. And certain areas were picked out for housing and this was the area. Now, it could very well have been Burlington Township, but he

picked out an area where there were only eight hundred people. If you go into Burlington Township which was much more land, it was too big for him. He didn't want that much. This was an ideal place. He looked all over, I'm sure. then he hired a couple local people to do his...which were lawyers. it so happened that the lawyer who was solicitor here was who he really hired. he had to resign because he had a conflict of interest. Then there was another lawyer that went in for a six month period. Then he became a judge, and then I came in here on July 1, 1955.

Vogel: Can we just cover the Rancocas plan one more time and then go on to another area?

Goldman: Before you do that, Hal...

(CHANGE OF TAPE)

Vogel: ...parced from Willingboro when, in effect, he still only had to deal with one political entity whether Rancocas was a part of it or not? Unless, of course, the people in Rancocas had an influence on the political entity.

Bookbinder: Not so much that they had an influence. See, for example, I don't think that he probably would really have cared

about whether Rancocas was included because it might have added something to it. Most people, basically, didn't want to sell. They didn't want any parts of this and they were throwing up roadblocks. And, so it became a political block that would have thrown stones at this all the way through. So, as a practical person, he jsut said, look, we got to get...you people want me to come over to Burlington County, I'm ready to come. I'm ready to spend millions and millions of dollars and I'll give you the best thing you ever had, but I'm not going to go over there and fight with everybody down the line. I understand that everybody can't like it, but I'm not going to have people be against just to be against. Now you people either want this or you don't want it.

Vogel:

You spoke of road blocks... in relation to when Levitt announced he was going to build. Those were the days

Bookbinder:

Well, for example, it used to get...it would get nasty in a sense that, let's say the guys, let's say when they finally made the public announcement that they were coming. Then, of course, the cry went up that the guys on the township committee are...and all that kind of nonsense. And it was nonsense. It was a lot of nonsense. Yet, obviously, it...a man comes in and puts this kind of...there had to be discussions of what to do and what kind of plans you are talking about. And, indeed, it got to the point where things had to be subsidized. And when things got moving he had to throw in for education, and, indeed, he buildt the sewer and water plant. LEvitt was not like any other

developer. That was new. Every other developer that ever came into any other municipality...the municipality built the streets, the sewers, the water system. When Levitt came in, that was the first thing he did, built the streets, put the sewers and water in, built the plant and the whole thing -- before the first house was built. For example, when I became solicitor in 1955, all the planning...that was the beginning of planning. The first house wasn't until 1958. Three years in putting in and getting the thing. Then, of course, you got. There was some litigation in relation to the business of the discriminatory litigation which was another thing.

Vogel:

What sort of litigation?

Bookbinder:

Well, there was a big suit in relation to when Levitt announced he was going to build. Those were the days when we had the builders. Black people just weren't admitted to any of these places. LK? They were just told. While New Jersey was the pioneer in having civil rights groups. I don't know if you know the history there. New Jersey had the first during the Driscoll administration in 1947. We created the first civil rights division in the attorney general's office in the United States. And at that time...for example in '47 and in '48 and even up until 1950 we had in Burlington County and in other places in New Jersey -- and probably more glaring in Burlington County, we had black schools and white schools. In 1950, not a hundred years ago.

And, so, by coming over to this kind of an area, and that was prevalent in North Jersey, particularly Levitt had that to overcome. And, against the advice of everybody, when he first made the announcement that -- of what he was going to build, he called a big conference in Washington and said, this is going to be an all white community. And the world like came to an end right then and there. Law suits were filed as soon as he had built the first house. A person who was a test case, people by the name of James, and they...

Vogel:

After the house was built?

Bookbinder:

Yes. When he put up all of the sample and so forth and the sale of the first. If I recall, the first day that he put the houses up, I think he sold about 800 houses in one day or something.

Sharrow:

I wonder if you could do some name dropping because you were the solicitor in 1955. Who were those three men? Do you recall the names of the three men who were a part of the...

Bookbinder:

The guy that...the person that was solicitor for many years was an old judge by the name of Charles A. Rigg, the next judge. But that's going back about 1935.

Sharrow:

Those three men. What were they called? Township committeemen?

Bookbinder:

Oh, yeah. The three guys on the township committee was made up of...let's see... when I came in 1955, it was Charlie Harrison, Herbie VanSciver, (pause)

and, I think, Johnny Walton. Then Charlie Harrison, after he sold his ground, he moved down to Delaware and Tommy Busby came on.

Goldman:

This is the Township Committee we are talking about?

Bookbinder:

No, sir. He actually submitted a plan. This is the first

Bookbinder:

Yes. Then we started to have...then when I came...

Goldman:

How many members did he say?

Bookbinder:

Three

Goldman:

Was Rancocas represented?

Bookbinder:

Let's see. I forget what year Rancocas was...Rancocas was still in the picture, but there was nobody from Rancocas. Joe Berkley, as I said, was on the County tax board, but he also held a job here...I think he was the Township Treasurer. Cress Stuart was the President of the Board of Education for about 25 years.

made the appointment of Herb Smith. So, he calls me up one day ... he sees in the papers that we appointed Smith, and he calls me up and he says, "What the hell you doin? I don't need no planning consultants. I got this all planned." I said, "Wait a minute. We're a municipal entity. You know, all this we're doing ... sure, we appreciate your input, but we gotta make up our minds... I mean we're a township committee and we can't just say, "Well, Bill Levitt said this is what we're going to do here." "Well, I don't need all that." So, I said, "Well, look. Let's have a meeting and Herb Smith is coming, and you be there, and-you know--" and he said, sure, OK." So we had a meeting.

Vogel:

Herb Smith actually submitted a plan. He didn't just evaluate the Levitt plan.

Bookbinder:

No, sir. He actually submitted a plan. This is the first meeting, of course. We had it in my office. (laughter).... said "Hey, look. This job is going to be God damn tough enough for me as it is." By that time, I had had a few meetings with him and I guess he was satisfied that I was going to work and not listen to everybody beating on him and so forth, and that I was going to work in the public interest and that, indeed, I appreciated the fact that they had the talent and we wanted input from them. Plenty of it. OK? Also, I told him that if you want to do all this, you are going to have to put some money in this 'cause these people don't have no money and they ain't gonna be.. and he said, "Well, of course, I don't expect that I'm going to do this, that, and the other thing." So, anyway, I call him out and say, "Look, you want to build this town? Then, you know, its got to be this way. It can't be any other way. You know. Now, you know. All you gotta do.. If you don't like it, Ok. Say, "Here's what we'd like to have" and let Herb Smith

go back to the drawing board and see what he can do with that. Ok? Let him know what your concept is. You haven't had a .. couldn't have a meeting with you until now. We just appointed this guy. We told him to make out a concept. You don't like this concept, give him your concept. You see? 'Cause he--frankly Herb Smith didn't have it laid out in neighborhoods. That was the way (Levitt) had it. We had no way of knowing what he wanted at that.. was the first meeting. But, once we got through that, then I never had any problem with him. We got to have a mutual respect and that was the kind of a situation it was. He knew that we had to do this thing orderly, and we needed all his input that he was going to have. So... '58, I believe, 1958.

(CHANGE OF TAPE)

okbinder:

... Oh, no. Well, indirectly I suppose, he paid the fees. Because what happened was after.. When I went in in '55-- that would be June-- then comes along the new budget for '56, and you then have..you have already started building roads and so forth and you've got to hire people and get ready for government and you have an increase in appropriations. Meantime, you don't have a hell of a lot of taxes. Of course, he's the biggest taxpayer--don't forget, he owns all the land. All this land, he's paying all the taxes. So, new assessments--you paid all these bucks. Everything went up and he's paying the bill, you know? And over and above that, there's still not enough because you have to start planning for certain other capital improvements and so forth. To make a long story short-- let's see, '56, '57, '58, and then came '58 in October was the first house. Even in '59. It was about four years that he (over and above paying taxes) he made excess amounts of money--he subsidized the government over and above the taxes he owed.

Vogel:

At whose request?

Bookbinder:

Well, at the request of the municipality. That's why. "Mr. Levitt, we can't make it. We don't have any money." He said, "OK. He wrote a check. How much do you need?" OK? And he did that in the schools, too. In the early days--the Stuart School wasn't opened up until '58-- Yes, it opened just about when the first house was built because then the municipality took over the school house for a municipal building, and the municipality took it over in '57. Yes, they took it over before the first house was built. Marshall Roser was the Chief. Kennedy, by that time, was Mayor. It was '58, I believe, 1958. And, he -- over and above building the schools and giving the schools, the elementary schools -- he subsidized the board of education for about three years.

Question:

Why?

Bookbinder:

'Cause they needed money to hire teachers.

Question:

That's why he was asked. Why did he subsidize them?

Bookbinder:

Why did he subsidize them? He had to subsidize them in order to get this town going. He had to subsidize them.

Question:

Had he not done that?

Bookbinder:

There wouldn't be a town. It's as simple as that.

Sharrow:

Then he made contributions, I understand -- I think this was Mr. Stuart who was telling me this -- he used to make contributions to both political parties.

Bookbinder:

From the standpoint of the politics of it, the politics situation, I guess that's true. I mean .. I can't .. I had nothing to do with that.

Sharrow:

But, however, he used to contribute more to that party that was in opposition to him. If there was opposition to him, he would contribute more to oppose that opposition.

Bookbinder:

Let's put it this way---I've had the unusual distinction, I guess, while I'm a Republican I've served both political parties. And, indeed, whoever was in power, those were the people he had to deal with. Now, I guess in a real world, he contributed to both parties. And indeed, he never really had very many people in the political world that would fight with him or..

Sharrow:

Probably the racial issue was the only one..

Bookbinder:

The racial issue and then the second issue which was a big mistake he made was in the change of names. He had changed it from Willingboro to Levittown. And then there was a group..

Vogel:

When was this?

Bookbinder:

Datewise again, I can't keep that in my head. In '58 was the first house, and then, I think, the following year it was changed from Willingboro to Levittown. And then it stayed Levittown..

Vogel:

How was that done?

Bookbinder:

By referendum.

Vogel:

How was that precipitated?

Bookbinder:

Well, naturally it came from the then governing body because Mr. Levitt asked that it be done.

Vogel:

How did he ask?

Bookbinder:

Well, he asked by making a request to the leadership.

Vogel:

In public?

Bookbinder:

No, I don't think it was in public.

Vogel:

Surrogate.

Bookbinder:

Right, his surrogate to the township committee was Ira Goldman. He had a relationship. He was the surrogate that made the request.

Vogel:

And at that time the township committee consisted of..

Bookbinder:

At the time of the name change, I guess it was Walton, Busby, and let's see..and, I think, Herby Van Sciver when the first name change. And then after that in the second-- then it was a group.. then we got.. it was about three years later and the town was then pretty well moving along. Maybe the population was..

Vogel:

So at this point the old guard was still..

Bookbinder:

In the first name change I guess the old guard was in position--in control--and then after that, then the old guard was still in control. Still had the township committee until 19.. when we got into the change of government under the Faulkner Act. I think that was '61. And, finally in '62, we became a Faulkner Act community, and then the name changed again to Willingboro--whether that was in '62--all that I do know is that there was a name change and that the old guard was not in control. We had some--you--know--the first flow of people were a lot of professional people, being liberals and so forth. And when (unclear) found it terrible to have a name like Levittown.

H. Vogel:

Why did the old guard accept Levitt's request?

S. Bookbinder:

Well, you know, there's a..What's in a name?
And who thought it was such a terrible thing. The guy
was doing such a job. Sure, he was in a profit business,
but you could go from one end of the world to the other..

H. Vogel:

And you were a solicitor at this time.

S. Bookbinder:

I was solicitor.

H. Vogel:

Were you asked to rule in the efficacy or to get..

S. Bookbinder:

The matt ? to a referendum. There is a statute that
provides for a change of name and how you do it. There is
nothing unusual about that.

H. Vogel:

What were the arguments in this case?

S. Bookbinder:

Well, the first round about it .. there wasn't any big
debate about it. From Willingboro to Levittown--it was
by pretty good vote. Some of the--you know, the older
people, they didn't want it. Historic value and so forth.
They could see the merit of the request, and they had a
right to.. they could have voted it down.

H. Vogel:

What was the essence of his request?

S. Bookbinder:

Simply that he had Levittown, Pennsylvania; he had Levittown,
New York; and he wanted Levittown, New Jersey. That was his
ambition -- to build. His ambition was to.. well from a
standpoint of when he left here, he changed his style a
little bit because I guess he realized that the practicality
of what he had accomplished here could just not be duplicated

too much. Because this was just an ideal size kind of thing. The population was a good size where .. a good community of 15,000 houses or 14,000 houses..

B. Sharrow:

Well, just as you're surprised that the fact that these old timers would agree to have the name changed from Willingboro to Levittown .. how come they didn't put up much of any objection to tearing down some of these historic houses you had here, some of these colonial houses, etc.

S. Bookbinder:

That's the old guard you mean?

B. Sharrow:

Yes.

S. Bookbinder:

Well, again, they couldn't basically.. the people who were involved and who had the historic houses were the ones that sold them, you know.

B. Sharrow:

There wasn't any great objection to tearing them down?

S. Bookbinder:

No.

B. Sharrow:

Did many of these people stay? These people -- these Willingboro people -- did they move into the Levitt houses?

S. Bookbinder:

Some of them did. For example, Johnny Walton. Cress Stuart. Of course, Cress Stuart stayed here a long, long time. He is one of the few who sold off just a portion and kept that until he wanted to sell it. And, let's see who else stayed here? Tony Harrison had left. His parents died. Busby, of course Busby died pretty shortly. He was a young man. He died just about when he was about ready to move from here. He was going to move someplace else. He was going to move out of town. Kennedy, of course, had bought one of the old houses, the historic houses. Never sold and became active

in politics and became Mayor. I guess he was at first an Anti-Levitt guy and became a pro-Levitt in the sense of helping build the community.

H. Vogel:

Does his home still stand?

S. Bookbinder:

He sold his home.. Reeves bought his home. Reeves has his Engineering firm in there.

B. Sharrow:

When did they change...

S. Bookbinder:

His wife lives in Beverly. She bought a home in Beverly.

B. Sharrow:

The Township Committee. When did it go from three to five persons?

S. Bookbinder:

It never went from three to five. It went from three to a Faulkner Act community -- township manager/council. In, I think in '62.

H. Vogel:

In the civil right case, there was a suggestion that .. in how you had presented it, that .. he was interested in an integrated community.

S. Bookbinder:

Right..

H. Vogel:

How had you come to this realization?

S. Bookbinder:

I came to it this way. The case went to the New Jersey Supreme Court, and as soon as the New Jersey Supreme Court made their decision, 7-0, he immediately .. Levitt immediately hired the original first director of civil rights in New Jersey who was a black man by the name of Harold Leck who is--without a question--one of the top people in the field who had left New Jersey and gone to Washington

and was with the Urban League. Retained him and brought him here to Willingboro. Set up an office for him. There was a citizens' committee for the purpose of establishing an integrated community, and the way it was done, it was very interesting .. one of the most interesting things, you know .. it is the old story about newspapers, they never print anything affirmative. But, it was done in an outstanding kind of way. By that time, I don't know how many neighborhoods were in existence. But, at any rate, there was, of course, a mediated decision that houses were being purchased and, naturally, they had a selection of wherever they wanted to buy. But again, in the realistic world, the prejudice is still there regardless of what the Supreme Court said. Needless to say, you can't legislate that or make like judicial decree to make anybody else love you--no matter what your skin or what church you go to. So, at any rate, what he did was give Harold Leck the complete, set out the program and said to him, "What do you want to do here?" He said, "Well in order to make this orderly without incident..." "They had so many incidents over in Pennsylvania, when the community was ten years old the first black person started to get in and there was a shooting match. OK?... "Without incident. We have to know who these black people were and who their neighbors were going to be." So as they sold to a black person, they made damn sure that the neighbors on either side and across the street were not bigots. And, how did they do that? Levitt had his people moved over here and had them in many instances..and went out and really got people to buy houses that didn't make a damn bit of difference to them. That's what the hell they did. And that's why it worked. It worked beautifully until the bastards of realtors did a blockbusting job on Pageant Lane where it all started. It would have truly been had there not been some blockbusting, which wasn't necessary...

Vogel:

When was this? When was the blockbusting?

Bookbinder:

Blockbusting was pretty damn fast. It must have been.. let's see .. there was evidence of blockbusting .. what year did you come here?

Goldman:

Sixty-four.

Bookbinder:

Pageant Lane had already been busted by then wasn't it? Well, anyway, about that time..

Vogel:

And when was the Supreme Court decision? Much prior to it?

Bookbinder:

Well, '58. It took about three years. I guess it was about '61 or '62.

Vogel:

So then you feel what Levitt was doing was forcing the issue.

Bookbinder:

Absolutely.

Vogel:

So why did he do it in such a ..

Bookbinder:

Well, I don't know. I can't answer that. I said he made one mistake. The other mistake he made was the second time around in going from .. when he got all exercised when this stuff was a movement by the groups of Willingboro to change Levittown back to Willingboro. And he had the Burlington County Times with him not to change it. And he still lives here, a fellow by the name of Goldstein. Had a small weekly, and he was, as I said facetiously .. Goldstein had all the pseudo liberals.

Vogel:

Was he the precipitator? Goldstein?

Bookbinder:

Goldstein. Yes.

Vogel:

Why?

Bookbinder:

Well, as I said, he was encouraged by .. you know, Levittown doesn't have the kind of connotation that historic Willingboro would. Needless to say, the liberals were.. (unclear)

Vogel:

How was the population persuaded?

Bookbinder:

The population was persuaded. What happened of course it was a .. chose up sides, and it was fine, and if Goldstein felt that way about it. But he got all upset, you know. And, by that time, Levitt had a ..

Vogel:

He?

Bookbinder:

Levitt. He got all upset. You know. And he had a bank and..

Vogel:

And the bank was called?

Bookbinder:

And the bank loan was called. Goldstein's.

Vogel:

What was the bank?

Bookbinder:

It was called the Bank of Levittown. It was his bank. He got the charter. He was chairman of the Board and he brought some--matter of fact, hired a whole crew from Philly National. A guy by the name of Moyer who came. That bank that is now People's is the bank. He sold it. In the meantime, of course, he established his national headquarters here in Willingboro. His plan was that .. he had plans about going to France and Israel and building houses. It was going to be an international headquarters, and he wanted that name. And when that happened, he just like went through the roof, you know?

That the bastards were going to do this to him after all he'd done, you know. So, "OK" he said. So, you know, he owns .. in all fairness, he had .. you know, it's incredible. You can only appreciate that .. how in working on this thing .. and every day it was a very exciting kind of experience to be part of building a community with this kind of leadership--this kind of man. It didn't .. whatever you needed, you got. You see. And he was only interested in seeing to it that the aesthetics .. and when it came to putting .. he got into .. he wanted .. his most .. like gasoline stations and the commercial establishments. No matter what we said .. when it came to the commercial layout, we had input in it. We didn't .. this highway business. He owned all this land. It was .. you know .. we said "why can't we do this with the gasoline stations here and put the gasoline stations there and not have it.." Anything you say. You want the gasoline stations.. and then he said, "Well, look. We don't want these ugly gasoline stations. We want them to look like colonial buildings." One of them got out of hand. It's the only one in the town. That's on Sunset Road .. the zoning officer there missed the boat. It's the only one. Anything you wanted. The Board of Education needed more money. They got it. Whatever it was, you see. So, all that he wanted was to have the name of a town. So, that when he heard that, he called me up. "Got t see you right away." I said, "What's the matter?"

You were still solicitor?

Yes, of course. "What's this going on? Put a stop to it."
So I said to him, "Look, you got everything going for you."

Leave it alone. Don't bother with it." These people, you know, every meeting .. you know. Especially when new people come in. They come in from all over. They want to do this, and Levitt controls that. You know, it was really rough to keep things. People. You just can't understand the human behavior sometimes.

Was there a natural opposition to Levitt from the..

Winder: Well, yes. It became .. some .. it got .. always being paranoid about the fact that Levitt controlled everybody. He is the biggest taxpayer. He ought to have something to say. And, if he has something to say that is right, what's the sense in saying you can't have it because your Mr. Levitt. For example, he went so far .. we had in this town without any question .. how long have you been here?

Eleven years.

Winder: OK. Let me tell you something. You're an educator. Believe it or not, this town has the best education system in this--without a question--this state. And I know what I'm talking about 'cause I've represented Boards of Education in a lot of places. You don't recognize it today. You know why? 'Cause he went out and got at that time .. and hired him and paid his salary from '55 to '58. A superintendent. And he paid the Superintendent. And that superintendent's job was to get the best teachers available no matter how much you had to pay for them. And in those days it didn't take a hell of a lot to get more than you was makin'. And we had teachers here that had gone along on college levels and superintendents of half a dozen communities who were teachers in this place.

Why did Levitt emphasize the educational system to that extent?

Because that, basically, is his dream. This was his dream community. Because he knew it was going to be hard to get .. this was his dream community. This was going to be his dream. He had in his plans a college here. A four year college. And that changed name, the day after that was done he was ready, and a year later he moved out the headquarters. And all those, all bets were off and no more schools was he going to subsidize and the whole bit.

Just to pursue this college idea a little bit, could he have, in fact, brought that about and could he have established a college here?

Sure, he could have. Why not? He was ahead of his time. The Burlington County College came much after that.

Did he have anywhere in his plans space allocated for that?

Yes.

Do you know where that would have been?

Well, it would have probably been in one of the .. that park area we now have or someplace like that.

But he was never able to buy that land, was he?

Sure, he bought that land. You mean all that Kimble tract and all that?

Yes.

- B. Sharrow: He didn't buy that until..
- S. Bookbinder: He eventually bought it. He bought the Kimble Tract. I've forgotten what year.
- M. Goldman: Do you mean that when the Township bought the Kimble tract for the use of Mill Creek Park, they were buying it from Levitt? Or they were buying..
- S. Bookbinder: They bought it directly from the Kimbles, but by the time that .. he gave up on the Kimbles because their price was outrageous. But, if it had ever gotten to the point of a college situation .. they indeed could have used the art of condemnation and worked it out that way.
- B. Sharrow: Did he have a plan for high rises in that area?
- S. Bookbinder: No. No. Never.
- A. Vogel: He had no plans for high rises?
- S. Bookbinder: The only .. of course what you see in .. what section is that?
- M. Goldman: Rittenhouse?
- S. Bookbinder: Rittenhouse. That came much .. that was not in the original program, but as time went on, these things became what people were looking for, and it was a good thing. It broke up the monotony of the area and all that kind of thing.

(CHANGE TAPE)

The pro and the ..

bookbinder:

Getting back to the changing story is the fact that on the change of names .. I'll never forget that day as long as I live. He says, to Ira Goldman, "You call that bank and you tell them to call Goldstein's loan." So I said, "You got to be crazy! What's the matter with you? You do that, and you're going to lose the ballgame. You're gonna lose it. Right now you're going to win." "How do you know?" I said, "I just know that people are not going to react because Goldstein and his paper is going to advocate that they don't change the name, because he hasn't got that much muscle. You got the Burlington County Times with you, and that--you're not going to lose that thing." "I can't take any chances." .. I said, "that's wrong" .. and Ira Goldman practically begged him. In fact, Ira Goldman said, "I will NOT call the bank. If you want to call the bank, you call them." That is the only time--'cause Ira Goldman .. actually, actually he idolized Bill Levitt. They had been boyhood friends, you know? They were closest .. he said--that was the only time-- "I've never said no to you. I will not do it." Bill picked up the phone and called the bank president and that was it.

How was he aware that Hank Goldman had a loan at this bank?

bookbinder:

Goldstein? He .. well, he was the chairman of the board. He had his fingers on everything, this guy.

ogel:

Was it legal for him to call in the loan?

ter:

Yes, it was legal 'cause it was a demand loan.

ogel:

And when he did, what happened?

bookbinder:

When he did, well, Goldstein blasted it -- front page of his paper. He recalls my loan because I'm against him.

ogel: And what did the Burlington County Times do then?

ookbinder: Nothing sensational.

ogel: How did they report it?

ookbinder: Well, they didn't report it at all, as I recall. They just .. They didn't .. They weren't willing to get into this squabble. As far as that was concerned .. Bill Levitt .. we said you just blew it .. you just blew it. And as a matter of fact, he only lost by about 28 votes.

ogel: Twenty-eight votes! Out of how many cast?

ookbinder: At that time, I think it was a couple thousand.

harrow: Well, do you think we are exhausting the gentleman?

ogel: Perhaps in closing you'll just perhaps want to think back on the pro and anti-Levitt factions, and think of some of the turning points in the various conflicts that arose. This may be what gave it character in the early days. Obviously, when anyone gets established, he has opposition. And, how are these various little battles characterized.

ookbinder: Well.. see, what happened was this. It's always .. Well, I guess maybe because I was so close to the situation.. I could never understand except that somebody .. the famous game of the INS against the OUTS was always here. And those who were in the "in" .. it could be popular if you were going to run a political campaign to say "Those guys .." with inferences that they are being taken care of. With all kinds of insinuous kinds of things. And, if you read .. you know, what's-his-name's book ..

el: Ganz

bookbinder: Ganz' book, you know .. as I took .. terrible disservice .. terrible disservice, because he leaves it with .. well, for example .. Herb Smith. As a matter of fact, Herb Smith was so upset when that book came out that he started a suit against Ganz and the publisher for libel, and ...

logel: To what did he take exception?

bookbinder: Well, because there was in there .. did you read the book? Did you read it?

logel: A portion.

bookbinder: Well, his inferences in there--that Herb Smith's plan was not Herb Smith, it was Bill Levitt. Whatever Bill Levitt said to do, Herb Smith did. He was just a facade, a front.

logel: 'Course that's ..

bookbinder: .. and it left a discredit to his professional integrity. It was .. what happened with the suit was simply that the .. they had .. unfortunate .. a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that .. placed .. that public officials are really just a target .. that you can call a public official anything you want and get away with it. That's the Sullivan case vs the New York Times, and that is where they relied and indeed they made a motion on that basis concerning that it was a public official.

logel: Provided there's not malice.

bookbinder: Yes. Not malice. You know, in this particular case, it would be very difficult to show malice. But, you could show motive which could amount to malice. You see?

logel: What would the motive have been?

Bookbinder: His motive. He had to make a classic case of Ganz so that he could teach this as an example of how the system works when somebody goes in with a lot of money, builds a town, and they do whatever they want--and that's what you have to do regardless of the sociological consequences. Now, you show me any place that has got more of the goodies of the sociological advantages than this place. See? And now he goes--a man at MIT -- and he's at Columbia, and the whole bit. And this is the biggest thing that's come down the pike. Where there's nobody anyplace .. There's been other places where somebody built, but not like here. No way have they done it the way this guy did it, nowhere.

Vogel: When you say that nobody did it quite like Levitt, what would you identify as these highlights?

Bookbinder: Highlights?

Vogel: The distinctions.

Bookbinder: The distinctions. The schools that have been given the community. Roads and sewer systems to which he .. that sewer system .. until such time as .. what happened on the sewer system is that eventually he offered it for sale to the Utilities Authority. The Utilities Authority bought the system for 10.5 million dollars and the appraisal on the system at the time of the sale was 18 million dollars. That system today is worth 40 million dollars. And we sold bonds in 1966. The purchase of that for 4.23. Oh, they were ready to go, these anti's. You know how many were at the public hearing? Four people. Remarkable situation. This was a remarkable place. Absolutely remarkable! What will happen is .. you know .. so many remarkable people here .. (unclear section.) and they let all this stuff happen. It is a pity. It's a crying shame.

When you say, "All this stuff happened" ..

age1:

Bookbinder:

Well, look what's happening today. Look what's happened. I told you, and I mean that.. You're an educator. I'm telling you that this was a place that had the best damn school system. I'd put it up against anything anywhere. Some of the early graduates of this school system.. It was nothing for these guys to get in .. who didn't even have .. accreditation for getting into Ivy League schools. Wherever you wanted to go.

Goldman:

To what extent was that development of the school system--from that to what you consider it to be now--a function of the quality of the people who moved in.

Bookbinder:

Well, I really frankly .. it isn't the quality of the people. It's the quality of the school system as you, or as you should know--only as good as the people who are administering it. Never mind about board of education. The quality is from the top. The Superintendent. A Superintendent can deal with any board of education. It's an old story. You got to know what you are doing and you got to know that what you are doing is right. So, we .. Johnny Mongan came here first. He didn't go to New York to get one, or Chicago, or Los Angeles, or San Francisco. He got a local guy who had a tremendous reputation --who had been a superintendent of a little place called Riverside. And, then he became a county superintendent and he really was a kind of county superintendent who went everywhere and built up the system. We had very excellent schools in this rural county because of this guy who was a terrific person and a hard worker. So, Levitt comes here and he wants to know who the Superintendent of the schools of the county is. So, Mongan starts to sit down with him 'cause they want to start planning the schools. And, he recognized this guy with a hell of a lot of talent, and he said to him, "You want a job? I've got a good job for you. You'll

be superintendent here." Best opportunity of a lifetime. He takes the job. What happened, of course, is that as soon as we got some of our .. all of a sudden .. after he had sweat the thing out, two heart attacks later, he was used up and the people came in and said, 'Goodbye, and Good Luck.' And then they bring in the next guy around, it was an old story here. All this turmoil that went on .. and then again we always had this business with the .. and it was natural to have ... new people came in. A lot of these people had never .. They came from New York, and Brooklyn, or Philadelphia or Chicago, or from the Air Force, and so forth. And here's a town, and we have something to say here, and they run for office. This is great. This is really America. Man! And all of a sudden someone gets on the Board of Education and he thought "Wow! My God, I'm on the Board of Education. Look who I am!" You know. And we get into this big ego trip. We used to have Boards of Education with guys who were - a guy who --- a graduate of Smith and guys who .. a graduate of Yale and somebody .. and you get all these people together and, hell, they know more about anything than the Superintendent and everybody else. So you always had two factions. I never got .. I served on the Board of Education for twenty years and every year my appointment came up, I never had a unanimous vote once. So, then all of a sudden you have people on the Board of Education that knew more than the Superintendent according to them. And the first thing you know, well .. Mongan is gone, and they hire another guy. They hired a guy from Watertown, Pennsylvania. And they hired him and they said to him, "We want you to come to the meeting when you really get appointed." So, he comes to the meeting and there must have been 300 people there. You know, only half the Board of Education wanted him and the other .. five of them wanted him, the other four didn't, you know. So, he don't know this until he gets there and all hell breaks loose, and finally they get him appointed. So, the poor guy

goes .. after the meeting I see he's really shook up. And I say, "What's the matter?" He says, "You have these kind of meetings all the time?"

"This is simple," I says.

"That's pretty heavy isn't it?" I said, "You don't have to worry about that. You know, a good job. You're succeeding a great guy, and you've got a great opportunity, and you've got a good faculty, and if you've got what it takes, professionally, and apparently, you have, 'cause you've been selected by the majority. Don't worry about the other four. The five who voted for you, they know. These people just have different points of view. So, anyway, a week later he called and said, "I don't think I'll take that job." So, that's how Harry Packer came. After that Harry Packer came. And here's a very able guy. You know, its the old story, his wife had decided that they had it, and gone. And then, of course, we got Gabe Reuben who was basically a little ahead of his time. And then, now, we've got this disaster. So, that's what happened.

Goldman: Harry Packer lasted for quite awhile.

Bookbinder: Yes. Harry Packer would have still been here. He was really great. He was outstanding! But, I guess, you know I always fault his wife. But, basically, Harry was not a well guy, and I guess it wasn't really known. He was not a well guy. He's dead you know. He died.

Goldman: I know. He died .. I guess it was two years ago. Or a year and a half ago?

Bookbinder: Then, of course, we had Lenny Copeland too, you know.

Goldman: I don't know him.

Bookbinder: A terrific guy. Now he's superintendent in Haddon Township. There was a guy. I tried to get Lenny Copeland to take it, but .. you know .. it was tough being here because of these people. Super egos. A big ego trip in a town like this. You know, it's not like the Board of Education in Burlington City. This is big. This is the big league here.

Vogel: But you have a population of 46,000 that didn't have a ..

Bookbinder: Big leagues.

Vogel: That's not unique? Isn't this what Levitt had formed. He created the monster.

Bookbinder: No. No.

Vogel: Forty-eight thousand people without a nucleus.

Bookbinder: No. First, he did not ever .. any reports to the contrary .. say I want this one to run and that one to run. When we had a change of government, for example, he did not send out -- for example, the best thing in the world a change of government-- he did not send out the forces not to change the government. Oh no. He was for it, 'cause he realized that the old township committee concept was not representative. We had to get update government. And when it came time for the first election, five Democrats were elected. There wasn't any Republicans. The only reason Sidney Bookbinder survived is that Sidney Bookbinder wrote the charter. And, if you're going to have a government and Sidney Bookbinder wrote the charter himself and never charged the community -- and they wanted the charter -- and I said, "I'm going to be the solicitor."

Vogel: Are you saying you were retained because you were the only one who could read it?

Bookbinder: I prepared it.
(Laughter)