



Interview with Mae Schwind Bahrs

Under the Auspices of the
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Highlands, NJ
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Mae Bahrs

Ms. Higgins: Well Mae, I just want to thank you for being a part of this *Remembering The Twentieth Century*, and let's begin at the beginning. Where did your people come from and how did they get to Highlands?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, my great-grandmother came over from Germany when she was fourteen years old, all alone. Of course I am sure she had a sponsor. Her name was Bertha Stahl.

Ms. Higgins: Did they come directly to Highlands?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, no. They arrived in Newark, and Newark was where I was born, too. So on one side, my ancestors are German and on the other side, they are Scottish. My great-grandfather came from Scotland, and his name was Alexander Hamilton. But he wasn't the Treasurer of the United States.

Ms. Higgins: What did Highlands look like when you got here?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I was a very small child, and it reminded me of a western town. Bay Avenue was a gravel road, and there were hotels all along. One in particular was Johnson's Hotel, right on the corner of Bay Avenue and Miller Street. That had rocking chairs, and it just looked like something you would see in a western town. My mother married Randolph Borden, who was a wonderful man. He had a

business at 50 Miller Street. He had a soda fountain, candy store, ice cream store, and luncheonette and pool parlor.

Ms. Higgins: And this was your father's store?

Ms. Bahrs: My stepfather's store.

Ms. Higgins: What is there now, Mae?

Ms. Bahrs: It's an apartment house, small apartments.

Ms. Higgins: How long was the candy store there?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, it was there from 1920 or so until he lost it during the Depression. But it was there for a good many years. In those days, pool parlors were a place for the town folk to socialize. It was a gathering place, and many people remember Borden's Pool Parlor.

Ms. Higgins: Can you tell us some of the other big hotels in Highlands back then?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I grew up with Jenny Johnson. Her parents had the Twinlight Hotel on the Shrewsbury River, on the corner of Shrewsbury Avenue and Cornwall Street. That was a lovely, old hotel, and the steamboat *Little Silver* used to come down and dock at the foot of Cornwall Street. And people from New York came down. They were Norwegian people, but because they had a Swedish band on weekends playing Swedish music, they referred to it as the Swedish Hop. So it was quite a lovely place. Her mother had hand-crocheted bedspreads for all the bedrooms, but they gradually disappeared.

Ms. Higgins: The bedspreads did?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, because people from New York came down on the boat and thought the bedspreads were so lovely, and they would find their way into the suitcases.

Ms. Higgins: Who were these people that came down? Where did they get the boat in New York?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I guess they got it at the Battery. In those days the steamboats were prevalent, and there were many of them like the *Mary Patton* and the *Thomas Patton*. We presently own the dock that is referred to as "the Old Patton Line Dock."

Ms. Higgins: That's by the restaurant there?

Ms. Bahrs: No, it's right across from our office. That address is 26 Bay Avenue, which is the address of the dock.

Ms. Higgins: Were they rich people, or what kind of people were they? And how did they find out about the Johnson Hotel and the Swedish Hop?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, the people in New York didn't have cars then. Or not many of them, anyway. A lot of them came from Brooklyn, and there was a big Norwegian and Swedish enclave there. So that was the mode of transportation in those days, or they would take the train. There weren't any buses.

Ms. Higgins: Did the train come right into Highlands?

Ms. Bahrs: Exactly. The railroad bed is right behind this office, and the station was right where Moby's is now. I have good pictures of that.

Ms. Higgins: Well, we certainly could use that train.

Ms. Bahrs: It is such a sad thing that they did away with it.

Ms. Higgins: This comes up over and over in interviews, Mae. There was a widow from Union Beach who took the train to Red Bank to work at Eisner's. She talked about how sometimes they would get the connection and come over to Highlands. It is a great loss.

Ms. Bahrs: So right here at this spot was the McGuire House. That was a very popular hotel, and right across the street was the Cruze's Hotel, right where the Flowbar Apartment is now on 24 Bay Avenue. Cruze's Dance Hall was right on the river, and that was a wonderful place.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about a dance there.

Ms. Bahrs: They had the name bands of the times, which nobody would remember now. One was Ernie Crickett that I remember, because my uncle played the banjo in his band. So I remember that one, especially.

Ms. Higgins: What kind of music did they play?

Ms. Bahrs: Jazz. We used to watch them doing the Peabody and the Charleston through the windows. It was really fun. Of course Bahrs Restaurant has been there since 1917. Coming down the street on that side, in the summertime they had Johnson's Pharmacy across the street.

Ms. Higgins: How about the Alpine Manor and Tempus Fugit: were they places people came from New York to visit? Wasn't that called the White Hotel for a long time?

Ms. Bahrs: I think where the Alpine was, I think that was named the Overlook Hotel. I am going to have to brush up on some of those names, whether that was the Overlook Hotel. Where the Stowaway Hotel was, that was called the Highlander.

Ms. Higgins: That's amazing. The population of Highlands must have tripled in the summer, at least.

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, it did. You almost couldn't walk down Bay Avenue. If you wanted to pass somebody, you would have to step out on the road and walk around them. It was so crowded.

Ms. Higgins: They came for the boating, the swimming, the fishing, or what did they come for? Did they come because it was cool? It's always cool here.

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, anything near the seashore is cooler. There were many summer cottages. Wherever there are condos used to be summer cottages.

Ms. Higgins: When did the seawall go up? Were people able to walk over to the ocean and swim?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes. The seawall was there as long as I can remember, and that's back in the early 1920s. I remember when I first came down here, it was in February. We took a ride over to Sea Bright and the froth was coming over. It was stormy, and the waves were making this froth. I haven't seen it lately, but I thought it was snowing. And I got so excited because I thought it was snow. But it was white froth from the boiling waves, you know.

Ms. Higgins: Mae, how did you meet Al and become a Bahrs?

Ms. Bahrs: We used to take the train from where Bahrs Restaurant is from Moby's Restaurant, which was the train station. I went to school in Middletown and walked down there every day to the train. Of course we had candy to sell to pay for our Washington trip, and Al Bahrs was one of my best customers. So he bought a lot of candy, and that's how I met him.

Ms. Higgins: Why did you go to school in Middletown?

Ms. Bahrs: You had a choice of going to Atlantic Highlands or Middletown. Somehow a lot of us chose Middletown, and of course a lot chose Atlantic Highlands as well.

Ms. Higgins: Did Al's family own the restaurant then?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes. They have owned it since 1917.

Ms. Higgins: Did they build it?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: Bahrs Restaurant is a Monmouth County institution.

Ms. Bahrs: Right. It started out as really a boathouse pulled up on the beach.

Ms. Higgins: Literally a boathouse?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, I have pictures of that. It was literally a boathouse. Al's mother and father ran the restaurant until they got going and hired a cook.

Ms. Higgins: Was it always seafood?

Ms. Bahrs: Mostly seafood, yes.

Ms. Higgins: And that famous coleslaw: whose recipe is that?

Ms. Bahrs: Jack Bahrs' recipe, Al's father.



**Kenneth, Al, and
Bud Bahrs (left to
right)**

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about the family.

Ms. Bahrs: All three brothers were involved. There was Bud, Al, and Ken. I have a picture of the three of them.

Ms. Higgins: Mae, what would you children do for fun in the summer and the winter?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, in the winter during the school year, besides sleigh riding, our great thrill was that we loved to mind babies. My friend Jenny and I would run down the hill from school, change our clothes, and whoever could get there first got the cutest baby.

Ms. Higgins: Where were the babies?

Ms. Bahrs: On Cornwall Street. Our favorite was Richard Rast, because he was so cute. Whoever got to his house first, got him. And then the other one would settle for the next lovely child. We would take them for a walk over the bridge, and the drawbridge was there at that time. The bridge tender would blow the whistle when one of the steamboats was approaching, and we would run like mad to catch a ride on the drawbridge.

Ms. Higgins: With the babies?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, with the babies. Can you imagine if the mothers knew that? (laughter) Of course the ends of the drawbridge were open! There was no gate there, and we weren't too adventurous with trying to wheel the carriage up to the edge of the bridge. Then in the summertime, we would go right down to the Miller Street bathing beach. There were bathhouses and a lifeguard. I remember one time I had a crush on Vincent Mendes, and this was during Prohibition. We were going out, and my cousin Peggy, who was down visiting from Newark, had a crush on his brother, Sidney Mendes. We were going out in the canoe. There was a hotdog stand there, and it was actually a pushcart. They bought us a hotdog and sauerkraut, and then Vincent couldn't go because he had to go home and wash beer bottles. His father had a speakeasy on Fourth Street, and he had to wash beer bottles. So his cousin came in his place, and I didn't care for his cousin. I think I was ten years old or so. So they bought us the hotdog and sauerkraut, and my cousin was three years older than I. She made me get in the canoe, and I didn't want to, if Vincent couldn't go. But I had to get in the canoe. I was so mad that I took the hotdog and threw it in the river, and I remember to this day the sauerkraut, roll, and the hotdog all floating down the Shrewsbury River. (laughter)

Ms. Higgins: In that current...whoosh. Happy seagulls.

Ms. Bahrs: Yes. Also at the beginning of Highlands, on the other side of the bridge, was Ahern's Hotel. Bartlet Ahern, who became a dentist. We had a lot of professional people from Highlands who became doctors, lawyers, etc.

Ms. Higgins: You also mentioned Dr. Weiss. Can you tell us about Dr. Weiss?

Ms. Bahrs: During World War II, he was transferred to Washington. He was working with some other scientists, and they developed the Atomic Bomb. My brother-in-law was a Navy captain, and he seemed to be working on that project, too. They flew him out to that site, wherever they developed the Bomb. They flew him out, but Dr. Richard Weiss went by train because they didn't want to lose him. He seemed to be sort of the main one, as I recall.

Ms. Higgins: And he grew up in Highlands?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, he grew up here and went to Highlands Grammar School and Middletown Township High School, I believe. Then he went to Randolph Macon College, and I don't know where he continued his education from there. But he was a very brilliant man.

Ms. Higgins: Another famous person is Gertrude Ederle. Do you remember stories about her?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, absolutely! Gertrude Ederle learned to swim in Highlands. She brought international celebrity status to the town. She was the first woman to

swim the English Channel, and she learned to swim in Highlands. Her father lowered her into the water by a clothesline from the Old Patton Line Pier at 26 Bay Avenue. She trained for the Channel swim by swimming from the Patton Line Pier to the Battery in Manhattan, and also to the Sea Bright Bridge.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever know anyone who had seen her swimming?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes. My sisters-in-law did. They were called the Swift girls, which was their maiden name. Edna married Ken, and there was Helen and Elaine, and then Millie married Ed Gronindale. They all grew up together. They had the Twinlight Club out on the dock, and they spent their summers there.

Ms. Higgins: Mae, with Highlands being right here on the water, there seems to have been a lot of activity during Prohibition. Can you recall any stories about that?

Ms. Bahrs: There are a lot of stories about that, but I'd have to go back in my memory.

Ms. Higgins: How about World War II stories? I hear over and over from people who live on the coast about shipping and having to have their lights out, etc.

Ms. Bahrs: Of course we had to have the blackouts, and we had to have dark curtains and draperies at our windows. At the time, we lived up on the hill. The first house we ever bought is now the Nun's Home on Navesink Avenue, and that was a two-story home. We had to have curtains up with the shades drawn. And with cars, you would have to have the headlights covered as much as possible. I know I gave several pints of blood. We didn't have a car, or if we had a car, we didn't have the gasoline for it. So I used to take the bus over to the Methodist Church in Red Bank to the Red Cross, when they were having a blood drive. Through the years, I gave over one hundred pints of blood.

Ms. Higgins: Wow! Before we leave talking about the restaurant, can you tell us your most significant memories of maybe an important event that took place at the restaurant?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I remember hearing about Texas Guinan. She was a guest at the restaurant back in the 1920s. I never met her, but I remember hearing that she was there. Of course many celebrities like Frank Sinatra were there.

Ms. Higgins: Frank Sinatra was there?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: I remember my sister went to dinner there once, and she ordered two shrimp cocktails and two cheesecakes. (laughter) How did you get interested in the real estate business?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, Al was in the marine construction of docks and bulkheads. In my estimation, it was one of the most difficult businesses to be in. It was dangerous and very difficult work. I knew that it was getting to him, and I could see that. So I thought I had to get into something. I got my real estate license and was with the Brook Agency in Atlantic Highlands. Then in 1968, I opened our office in Highlands. And Gertrude Ederle cut our ribbon! I'll get that letter so you can read it.



Gertrude Ederle (cutting the ribbon) making an appearance at the opening of Brook Agency in Atlantic Highlands, 1968

Ms. Higgins: Mae, would you comment on the improvements in water transportation from Highlands and Atlantic Highlands and the proposed Belford Ferry? What is your opinion of that? What about water service in general, back and forth to the city?

Ms. Bahrs: I remember the history of that because the steamboats used to come down from New York with passengers, and they would disembark here. They had stops all along at Oceanport, Red Bank, and so on. The farmers used to send their produce back to New York on the ferries, like the *Little Silver*, the *Mary Patton*, the *Thomas Patton* and the *Albertina*. And horses used to be transported, too, from Monmouth Park to wherever in New York, to go to Saratoga, I guess. So when the Circle Line used to come down to our dock, I knew that they would be able to some day have this ferry service, which is so great for the commuters. It lessens the traffic on the Parkway, which is horrendous, as we all know.

Ms. Higgins: Is the Connors Hotel still operational?

Ms. Bahrs: No.

Ms. Higgins: I notice that's where the ferry seems to leave from that area.

Ms. Bahrs: The Connors Hotel has been demolished, which is very sad. It is now a parking lot. So that is very sad because we had our Class Night at Connors Hotel after our school burned around 1928, and the school was at the top of Miller Street hill and the highway, which is Navesink Avenue. We attended school in Highlands Firehouse and the Lion's Club, which is now the American Legion Hall. We graduated from the Marine Theatre, which is now the Lusty Lobster. And then we had our Class Night at Connors Hotel, and it was just like being on a movie set, in our eyes.

Ms. Higgins: Was the carousel in Highlands when you came here?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes. That was a really fun place.

Ms. Higgins: I notice Katz's is still here.

Ms. Bahrs: It has been here a long time. We had Ed Levy's Vegetable Market and Joseph Cotton's Vegetable Market, and they were archenemies. They were side by side where the Highlands Post Office is now. They would keep putting their produce further out on the sidewalk until they were practically out to the curb, and people would have to walk around it. They had price wars, and they were always under pricing the other one, and people had a great time shopping.

Ms. Higgins: I see you have a Farmer's Market now. When did that come to town?

Ms. Bahrs: A couple of years ago.

Ms. Higgins: Are there farms in Highlands?

Ms. Bahrs: No, they bring it in from Fort Monmouth, Holmdel, or wherever people have small farms.

Ms. Higgins: What do you see as the future of Highlands, Mae?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, people are just discovering how beautiful it is, and how much there is here. Our hill is the highest point on the Eastern Seaboard between Maine and Florida, and you have heard that before. And we have the Atlantic Ocean, two beautiful rivers...the Shrewsbury and the Navesink, and a small town. We have more and more people wanting to move to Highlands because of the small town atmosphere, which has disappeared from many areas in the country.

Ms. Higgins: How can you keep it a small town with more and more people?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, it's not going to be easy. There just isn't any more room unless we build boathouses on the river. (laughter)

Ms. Higgins: Well the planning, though, seems to be holding. Highlands does look good, and there are always lots of good restaurants in Highlands.

Ms. Bahrs: Yes. Fortunately years ago, our town fathers had great vision. We had our own water department, and we had artisan well water. I have heard that they could pump 16,000 gallons a minute from the artisan wells. We had our own sewer plant, and we had our own incinerator.

Ms. Higgins: And you also had a vibrant clamming industry.

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, of course.

Ms. Higgins: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes. Many of the ladies in the town were widowed, or they worked to help their husbands, and so on. They had what they called "clam shanties." I remember them down at the foot of Miller Street. The women would get up and be down at the dock from four a.m. opening clams. They would have a potbelly stove for heat, and many of them had a wonderful sense of humor. They were joking and laughing, even though this was a difficult job. Their poor hands were cut and scraped, and they would open clams. As I recall, my friend Vera Fong's mother worked in the clam shanty. We used to go down there, and they would put as many clams on each finger as they could hold. Then they would fill a quart jar, and the clams would be packed in ice. Their husbands, or the men who owned the clamming business, would take them up to the city, mostly New York to the Fulton Fish Market. That was a daily procedure.

Ms. Higgins: A lot of employment?

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, it employed a lot of the ladies. Of course there were the men clamming and lobstering.

Ms. Higgins: Lobsters?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes, there was a big lobster operation here. In fact I remember lobster boat races as a small child. There were parades, and baby parades, and beauty contests, and then lobster boat races. That was a big thing in the summertime.

Ms. Higgins: Do you see that business reviving as the water is getting cleaner?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes, the water is getting much cleaner. As long as we can keep New York's stuff over there. I mean that's what happened here, but thank goodness for the people who were so active in Clean Ocean Action.

Ms. Higgins: Mae, Highlands has had some economic reversals, but now is making a comeback. Can you comment on this?

Ms. Bahrs: Unfortunately, from 1927, the first hurricane that I remember, Highlands has had a hurricane about every seven years that knocked the socks off of everybody, particularly the business people on Bay Avenue. There would be anywhere from two to four feet of water, you know. Fortunately, we haven't had one since 1992.

Ms. Higgins: Are you better prepared for any others to come, or is Highlands just naturally prone to the flooding because of its position?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I think all the sand they pumped in all along the shoreline, from Sandy Hook to Spring Lake or wherever they stopped, has helped. And that was only done during the past eight years. Then they put in a new steel bulkhead up on Marine Place, and I am sure that has helped a lot, along with all the sand. Whenever the ocean roared and overflowed, Highlands and Sea Bright would get it. I don't think either town has had a bad flood since 1992.

Ms. Higgins: On a more personal note, Mae, can you tell us about some exciting trips you might have had? Or adventures?



**Mae Bahrs, Joan Donovan,
and Pope John Paul**

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I have been very fortunate in the past fifteen years or so. I went with a friend, Joan Donovan, to Rome, and we had a private audience with Pope John Paul. I remember at the time, he had just gotten back from Texas. I didn't know what I was going to say to him, and all I could think of was I was so glad he had gotten back from Texas. And that's what I said to him. He asked what we girls were doing here, and I blurted out, "Oh, I'm so glad you got back from Texas."

Ms. Higgins: I probably think he was, too. (Laughter)

Ms. Bahrs: Yes, right. Then of course, I have been to China, Alaska, England, Scotland, and Thailand a few years ago. My very dear friend started this school, and she was a retired school teacher. Her name is Agnes Shilling Hebler, and she started a school in Thailand. It was very successful, and my daughter and I went over with her to visit.

Ms. Higgins: Who runs the ship here when you are traveling?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, my son runs it...Craig Bahrs.

Ms. Higgins: This is a real family business?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes.



**Three generations of Bahrs (Al
Bahrs is seated on the left)**

Ms. Higgins: Your roots are very deep in Highlands, aren't they, Mae?

Ms. Bahrs: Oh, yes. I really can't imagine living anywhere else. I know everybody when I walk down the street, and the little kids even say, "Hi, Mae!" Nobody calls me Mrs. Bahrs. I wouldn't know how to answer to that.

Ms. Higgins: I thank you so much for this interview, Mae. Is there anything you would like to say, in closing, like maybe advice to people who will be reading or listening to this interview in fifty or seventy-five years?

Ms. Bahrs: Well, I enjoy working and have worked really since I was high school age.

Ms. Higgins: Selling candy, right?

Ms. Bahrs: Right. Just have a dream and keep working toward it.

Ms. Higgins: Thank you, Mae Bahrs, thank you very much.