Interview with Mary and Robert Owen

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

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Birthdates of Subjects: Mr. Owen, February 26, 1921 Mrs. Owen, June 8, 1920

Mary Owen

Mrs. Owen: It is wonderful to have you here, June, and I am happy to give some thoughts on growing up in Monmouth County and returning to Monmouth County after my husband's career in the Foreign Service, and what it has meant to me. We are in the home of my grandparents, Edwin O. Woolley and Mary Alice Woolley. They lived here since 1903 until their deaths. They had three children, but they sadly had two who died. But the three living children were James H. Woolley, Owen Woolley, and my mother, Mary Alma Woolley. My mother married comparatively late in life, and she married Edward Hance of Freehold. I used to visit this place when I was a little girl with my family, of course. I would come and spend a week or so in the summer with Grandmother and Grandfather, and Uncle Owen. When I grew older I also went to Long Branch to visit Uncle Jamie, as he was called, and Aunt Addie, his wife. They had no children, and I don't know if it was easy for them to have a little girl to visit or not. But they would have me for a week, and so did cousins who lived just down the street. To tell you the truth, visiting those cousins was the best visit. They were so loving of children, and they had a nice little dog, Captain, whom I enjoyed. We didn't have any pets at home in Freehold, so that was really a treat to have a dog to enjoy.

Ms. West: You were born in Freehold?

Mrs. Owen: I was born at what was then the hospital in Long Branch. I forget what it was called. But it is now the Monmouth Medical Center, of course. But I grew up in Freehold on Court Street, opposite Monument Park. That was a nice place to grow up. There was the park across the street to observe. However, my dear best friend, with whom I grew up, and I would love to go over to that park to play. But there was an overseer of the park who lived sort of in the rear of the area. He would come with his collie dog and chase us. (Laughter) And he would scare us, oh dear. So that was a little unfortunate happening. I watched the excavation for the Monmouth County Historical Association building. It was erected in the field next to us. The field used to have cattle grazing there, but it was certainly put to good use by having this fine Historical Association building.

Ms. West: What year was that erected?

Mrs. Owen: I believe that was in the 1930s, June. I am not sure, but maybe around 1935. I had chicken pox and was in bed, so I was able to watch. My father had two sons living, who were my half-brothers. One was Clifford Hance, and the other was Henry Hance. Both of them had farms. My father had been a farmer, having a farm that still exists on Burlington Road in Freehold Township. It is now used for horse training. It is a wonderful farm. So we visited that, and I called those two half-brothers uncles, because they were so much older than I was. Uncle Henry took over the running of that particular farm when father left it. So that farm was a part of my life. Uncle Clifford had a farm where he boarded horses and raised hay. So that farm was also, in a way, a part of my life. So it is no wonder that when we returned here to Monmouth County, I became interested in the environment. I began to work with recycling, and everything else possible to save the land. I am trying to save land.

Ms. West: You mentioned about when you returned here. This was after your husband retired from the Foreign Service?

Mrs. Owen: Yes. We debated as to whether we should retire in the Washington area. But Uncle Owen had left me this property, which was rented between the time of his death and my husband's retirement. And we debated and decided that Monmouth County was the place we wanted to come back to. And I am so thankful that we did that.

Ms. West: Did you have your schooling here in Monmouth County?

Mrs. Owen: Yes, the Freehold schools and Freehold High School.

Ms. West: Now your husband was telling me about this one-room school. Did you go to that same one-room school?

Mrs. Owen: No. He went to another one that was close to his house when he was a little boy. But I went to the Broad Street School in Freehold for one year.

Then for whatever reason, we were transferred to the Hudson Street School. So that is where I went.

Ms. West: Was that the grade school or high school?

Mrs. Owen: That was grade school. Then I went up the street just a little bit for seventh and eighth grades, to the Intermediate School. After that, I went to Freehold High School.

Ms. West: And then you went on to college.

Mrs. Owen: And then I went on to college.

Ms. West: And what college did you attend?

Mrs. Owen: New Jersey College for Women, as it was known then. It is now Douglass College. I majored in journalism. I wanted to be a dancer when I was a little girl. But I took dancing lessons, and I found that I was not happy performing on a stage. So that worked me away from that. Mother really didn't want me to get married. She wanted me to have some kind of career abroad. She thought that would be wonderful. So I took French lessons with a couple of friends, even before I went to high school. But that wasn't for me. And so I was led to take journalism. While I never had a job in journalism, I think all the writing I have done for different reasons since meant that I was supposed to do that.

Ms. West: Are there any persons in Monmouth County that have had any significance in your life?

Mrs. Owen: Well, there is Betty Yard. She was Editor of the Monmouth Democrat Newspaper in Freehold. It was a weekly, and she was kind enough to take me in one summer to help her. I don't know if I really helped or hindered her, but she certainly gave me some support.

Ms. West: Did you do much traveling around in the county?

Mrs. Owen: Not so much. Of course in those days, traveling wasn't as easy as it is now. The cars didn't have heat or air conditioning, and they weren't as speedy, of course. But we went visiting. We had relatives in West Freehold. That was another farm in my life: the husband of a great-aunt of mine lived there. It was called the Solomon farm. And there are things in this house, like this chair for instance, that came from that farm. And we drove down to the shore. We loved Asbury Park. In those days, it was just wonderful for shopping, going to the beach, and for amusements. We did take a bus to Trenton, and that was wonderful, too.

Ms. West: How do you see Monmouth County today as opposed to the days when you were a youngster?

Mrs. Owen: Of course it has changed. It was an agricultural county. After my father retired from his own farm, he worked for the Brakely Canning Factory that was in Freehold. He went around to different farms supervising their production of produce for that canning factory. And so, you can see how I would ride along with him sometimes to see these farms.

Ms. West: What do you feel today…knowing what it was and how things were like then, and seeing how things are today?

Mrs. Owen: I am sorry to say sometimes it is heartbreaking to see the changes. Of course there is much to be praised, but also there is much that has been lost.

Ms. West: Is there any part of the county, historically, that might mean a little something more to you?

Mrs. Owen: These houses. As I say, there is that farm house on Burlington Road. In Elberon, there is my great-grandfather Mount's house on 4 Helen Court. That is a wonderful old house and has blessedly been restored. It is being lived in by a wonderful family now. On the corner of Route 35 and Deal Road is the Eden Woolley house. He was the brother of my great-great-grandfather, I think. He was one of the first councilmen in Ocean Township. So there are these houses that are parts of farms.

Ms. West: That is part of your life as well as a part of history that you are learning about. It is part of your life that you have experienced. You did mention this chair. Do you have other souvenirs or things around relating to the county?

Mrs. Owen: Well, this chair came from one of the farms. Upstairs is furniture. The bedroom above us has furniture that came from that house on Court Street, the bedroom suite. In the back bedroom is my great-grandmother Woolley's chest of drawers. And there is a little side table that I guess my great-great-grandmother White made. How she ever made a table, as a woman, I don't know. But it is a fine little side table by the bed.

Ms. West: I guess it gives you a feeling of closeness when you see all of this. You were showing me the peony out in the yard this morning. That was a root from your great-grandmother's peony. So how old would that root be? Almost 200 years old?

Mrs. Owen: I guess it would be 150 or 175 years old.

Ms. West: Just think that someone can keep that going for generations more.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, that would be wonderful.

Ms. West: So I can just imagine how you feel here in your home. It is the year 2000 now, and you go into houses now and see all the contemporary furnishings that you tire of and want to change. But you really feel like you are walking into a home here. I am sure that is how you must feel, that you are in a home, and not a showroom. I just know all the pleasure I have derived just being here all day, and I feel like I am home. It is just so comfortable, the atmosphere and the ambiance here in the house. It is just wonderful. Now tell me, as a little girl growing up before we had television, did you listen to the radio much?

Mrs. Owen: Yes.

Ms. West: Were there any favorite radio programs that you liked to listen to?

Mrs. Owen: Amos and Andy, The Shadow Knows, and right offhand I can't remember any others. And we used to listen to the news, of course.

Ms. West: And which commentators do you remember?

Mrs. Owen: I can't remember their names.

Ms. West: Looking at the way the children dress today, what were the fads in your day growing up? How did the youngsters dress?

Mrs. Owen: Well, we didn't have many clothes. You had best Sunday shoes and then your daily shoes. We had to wear stockings with some kind of funny garters, which I hated. (laughter) But that is what we had. We had simple little dresses, and mother made a lot of my clothes.

Ms. West: What type of music did you like?

Mrs. Owen: We had a Victrola in the front parlor. We used to listen to all kinds of nice old-fashioned records.

Ms. West: For the youngsters or others listening to this, tell them what a Victrola was.

Mrs. Owen: A Victrola was a piece of furniture that stood up maybe three or four feet tall. There was a storage space on the bottom for your records, and then the record player was on top, covered. So you lifted the cover, and then you were ready to play music. You had to wind it to keep it going. There was a player piano in that room, too. Even though I took piano lessons, I wasn't a success at those. So I was happy with a player piano.

Ms. West: Now the youngsters today might wonder what a player piano is.

Mrs. Owen: You had a roll of paper, into which was cut holes that somehow let air through. You sat on a bench in front of this piano, and you pumped so that the roll would turn and produce music.

Ms. West: As we call them, The Good Old Days, right?

Mrs. Owen: That's right. (Laughter)

Ms. West: You mention your family all being here. But where did they originate, your ancestors? What part of the world did they come from?

Mrs. Owen: England.

Ms. West: Who is the first President that you remember?

Mrs. Owen: I remember Calvin Coolidge.

Ms. West: Do you remember the first movie that you saw?

Mrs. Owen: The one with Mary Pickford going across the river, where there were crocodiles. I don't remember the name of it, but obviously I never will forget Mary Pickford.

Ms. West: Was that a talkie or a silent movie?

Mrs. Owen: A silent movie. My dear friend Betty and I loved to go to the movies. The Strand Theatre in Freehold would have Saturday afternoon movies, so she and I would enjoy those.

Ms. West: Did you like to read?

Mrs. Owen: Oh, I loved to read.

Ms. West: Did you have a favorite author?

Mrs. Owen: Robert Louis Stevenson, and whoever wrote the twin series. That was wonderful. There were Eskimo twins and Mexican twins, etc.

Ms. West: Did you have any heroes or heroines, or people that you looked up to?

Mrs. Owen: Charles Lindbergh. I was seven years old when Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic, and that certainly was an exciting, wonderful accomplishment that we listened about on the radio.

Ms. West: Do you remember what year that was?

Mrs. Owen: 1927.

Ms. West: What made that so special though?

Mrs. Owen: It was the first solo flight across the Atlantic.

Ms. West: And where did the plane take off, do you recall?

Mrs. Owen: From the New York area.

Ms. West: And it flew from New York to where?

Mrs. Owen: Paris.

Ms. West: So back then, it was quite a feat.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, indeed!

Ms. West: What type of music did you like to listen to?

Mrs. Owen: I liked all kinds of music. Betty and I used to do jigs in the kitchen. When I took those dancing lessons, I learned to tap dance. And Uncle Owen was trying to teach me to tap dance. Every Sunday when we came down to visit for dinner, he would have me in the kitchen tap dancing. And I wasn't too good at it. He was better than I was.

Ms. West: Did you ever listen to the Big Bands, as they were called?

Mrs. Owen: Oh, I loved them.

Ms. West: Did you have a favorite band or orchestra that you liked to listen to?

Mrs. Owen: Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. Bob and I came down to Asbury Park to dance at the Casino.

Ms. West: Oh, it was down at the shore.

Mrs. Owen: Yes.

Ms. West: So you loved to dance.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, we both loved to dance.

Ms. West: With the advent of television, were there any favorite television shows that you liked to watch, especially when it first came out?

Mrs. Owen: Yes, there were good ones.

Ms. West: Do you remember the atmosphere at the time when people got televisions that came into their home?

Mrs. Owen: Yes, it was exciting. There was Ozzie and Harriet, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez, and they were fun programs.

Ms. West: Did you have any hobbies?

Mrs. Owen: Not especially. I can't think of any that were so consuming. Betty and I used to walk down to Lake Topanemus. That was something. It was so different from nowadays. We were so carefree and without worry. We were without concern or fear. She and I, at eight or ten years old, would walk from Monument Park down to Lake Topanemus, which was maybe a mile or so north of Freehold. We would just walk around there and look at the fish, if we were fortunate enough to see any fish. There was a place to rent rowboats, and sometimes we would rent one and be down there all day. Mothers didn't have to worry about us, we were fine. And when I was at college, I worked on the school newspaper at night, trying to get it ready for publication. I walked home by myself at midnight back to the dormitory, with no fear.

Ms. West: And today?

Mrs. Owen: You wouldn't do it.

Ms. West: That's sad.

Mrs. Owen: I know.

Ms. West: Is there any outstanding event or newspaper headline that stands out in your mind during the course of your life?

Mrs. Owen: I suppose World War II, the Declaration of War. I can remember sitting in this very room. Uncle Jamie had just died. His funeral was December 6th, it seems to me, and his birthday was December 6th. He must have died just about that time. We all were together after that sad time in this room, where the big radio was over here in the corner. And then the news of Pearl Harbor came.

Ms. West: That was pretty devastating.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, I should say so. So Bob, who of course had majored in ceramics and went on to MIT for Graduate work in that, had to stop and go serve in the Navy.

Ms. West: Can you explain to them what ceramics is?

Mrs. Owen: Ceramics also has industrial uses. It is bricks and clay work for building, and all that kind of thing.

Ms. West: The average person listening to this might think of pottery, so thank you for the clearer understanding of what it is. How long have you and Mr. Owen been married?

Mrs. Owen: It will be fifty-eight years this August.

Mary and Robert Owen, 1995

Ms. West: Isn't that wonderful! And you have how many children?

Mrs. Owen: We have four children.

Ms. West: Are they living in New Jersey?

Mrs. Owen: No.

Ms. West: Are they a distance away?

Mrs. Owen: The oldest is in Maine, and my next oldest is the daughter who lives in Michigan. My son is next, and he is in Florida. And my youngest is in North Carolina. So they are spread out.

Ms. West: I guess with the advent of transportation, the world has become smaller or more accessible, and we get further and further away from home.

Mrs. Owen: That's right, but they come to visit.

Ms. West: That's so nice, and I'm sure you look forward to that. How many grandchildren do you have?

Mrs. Owen: Seven. And that's nice. The three youngest boys who are in North Carolina love to come here. They really enjoy it.

Ms. West: Do they live in the city?

Mrs. Owen: They have a little farm there.

Ms. West: So they have a touch of the country.

Mrs. Owen: That's right. They help their father with the animals, and they have a good farm life.

Ms. West: What would you say is your greatest achievement in life?

The Owen Farm, 1999

Mrs. Owen: Well, I am thinking it would be the saving of these fields, which we have done. That is my greatest achievement as far as something for the future is concerned. The seven and a half acres has a conservation easement, and the town will probably take them over perhaps by next year. So they will never be built on.

Ms. West: Isn't that wonderful?

Mrs. Owen: Yes, that's really wonderful. But then I'm so thankful, of course, to have these four fine children and seven grandchildren.

Ms. West: Awhile ago you were talking about your recycling work, and I got the impression that you are more or less the "mother" of recycling here in Monmouth County. Could you tell us a little something about that and how you became involved?

Mrs. Owen: We lived in Russia, in the Soviet Union for a time. They had little, special collection points or shops for bringing back your milk bottles and jars for preserving fruits and vegetables. People were paid for them, and that was a wonderful system. In other European countries, you returned your beverage bottles.

Ms. West: Could you give me a year for that?

Mrs. Owen: We were in Moscow twice, 1951 and 1952, and then again in 1958-1961. It must have been the second time we were there, and we were so conscious of that. When we came here to West Long Branch, I listened to the Asbury Park radio station. I heard Henry Seales, who was in Long Branch, and he was forming a recycling operation there. So I thought that if Long Branch can do it, why can't we? I took my things to Long Branch and observed how they handled it all. And so in 1973 I went to my first Council meeting here in West Long Branch and asked why they couldn't start doing it. Well, the councilman responsible for the Environmental Commission was interested. He, I, and another friend talked about it all, and we thought that the best way to begin was to have the Scouts make money from it. And so not only the Boy Scouts, but the Girl Scouts as well got involved. They helped with the collection of newspaper from the people, and they put the papers in the recycling company's truck, and they got the money for it. And that was a good income for them, and it worked out well. And it was good training for them, also. So that went well, and then we decided we should get into glass. So we did glass next. And the processing company took the glass as well as the papers. So then we branched into aluminum and tin, and so we got a program going. Finally we thought it was going so well, the town could take it over. So they took it over then. A friend in

Oceanport, whom I got to know by telephone, wanted to get a regional program started, to get more towns into it. So she and I worked and went to meetings and did what we could, and we did get five towns really involved. And it has really spread.

Ms. West: And now in a lot of other states, everybody is recycling.

Mrs. Owen: That's right.

Ms. West: That must give you a great sense of accomplishment as far as the environment is concerned, right? And you are still involved in this program?

Mrs. Owen: I try.

Ms. West: So what would you say is your greatest achievement in life, besides recycling?

Mrs. Owen: Well, the saving of the fields.

Ms. West: The way things have transpired over your life, when you look back to your youth and look how things are today, how different has your life been than what you thought it might be as a youngster?

Mrs. Owen: I certainly never expected to travel and live abroad. And yet that was what my dear mother hoped for, and by marrying a man she didn't exactly approve of, that happened for me. And she didn't want me to be a slave to housework. Because we were abroad and our life circumstances were such as they were, I had help with the housework. So it is really interesting how things worked out. I would not have expected all this, yet it must have been meant to be. When I was little and visiting here, there was a coal range in the kitchen, and it was hot in the summer. There were laundry tubs out on the west side, where now there is a little room where the freezer and little bathroom are. Those were valuable means of doing the laundry. We sat out on the front porch to keep cool. In the summer, there were five or six rocking chairs or wicker chairs out there. Now you couldn't sit out there. The air is bad quality, and it is so noisy with all the traffic that you can't hear each other speak. So you don't see any chairs out there.

Ms. West: And you have a beautiful, wraparound porch.

Mrs. Owen: But also in all the other places that I have been mentioning, they are not in use any more.

Ms. West: So your lifestyle has had to change drastically.

Mrs. Owen: Absolutely.

Ms. West: It would be nice to sit out there on the porch.

Mrs. Owen: And have a cool breeze blowing.

Ms. West: Nothing remains the same.

Mrs. Owen: That's right. When I was a little girl and grandfather was still alive, I never will forget the time he was going to take the horse to be shod. There was a horse out there in the barn, but the barn has since burned, unfortunately. There was a cowshed behind the barn, and there was a nice cow that produced wonderful milk. Well, he was taking the horse and invited me to ride along. So on this country road, just a gravel road, we went across the area where Pathmark is now and the new mall is across the street. We could just cut across that, it was like a wooded area, but we could cut through there to get to Eatontown, where the blacksmith was. Imagine! That must have been around 1926 or 1928. You would never think of having a horse and wagon on a road these days.

Ms. West: Gosh, no.

Mrs. Owen: Another memory was Freehold on a Saturday night. After my father died in 1935, Mother and I would feel free on Saturday nights to walk downtown and see the people. The stores were open, and it was such fun. People came in from other towns to shop or just walk around and see things.

Ms. West: It was more like a village then, right?

Mrs. Owen: That's right.

Ms. West: When you look at the world today, how does that make you feel?

Mrs. Owen: I am having a hard time with this year 2000, I'm sorry to say. Maybe I had big anticipation that things were going to be better for people and the world. But to me, people are suffering and the world is suffering.

Ms. West: When your children or grandchildren come around and you sit down to tell them the stories about how things were, do they listen politely?

Mrs. Owen: Now and then we will talk about it, and I think they appreciate hearing about it.

Ms. West: So what would you say would be your legacy to your children and grandchildren?

Mrs. Owen: It's hard to say, but I think, memories. We have shared a lot together, living overseas together. Perhaps that's more real to them than this house is. Jeff, the youngest, was about twelve years old when we came here. So

he is the only one who went to the West Long Branch schools and to our church. So the town means a little bit more to him, and yet he was not happy. He kind of didn't fit in, so he doesn't have the best memories of it. We offered him to come here and take over the place, but he didn't want to. While I can sit and convey to you these things, it is not easy for me to talk to them about it. Or maybe I just don't take the time.

Ms. West: Is there anything that you would like to accomplish that you haven't yet?

Mrs. Owen: I would like to see this house preserved. There is no provision for protecting this house, along with the land. And you know yourself, to restore an old house with all the lead paint, old electrical wiring, and asbestos in the cellar, takes a lot of money. And yet, it has a lot of history here. As you say, the furniture alone is valuable.

Mary and Robert Owen outside of their farm house

Ms. West: How old is this house?

Mrs. Owen: Well, as Bob said, he thinks it was built around 1870 or 1880.

Ms. West: What about historical significance? What about the Historical Society?

Mrs. Owen: No way. I have talked to them all. I talked to the Monmouth County Historical Association first of all. Then I talked to the Monmouth Conservation Foundation, and it has its hands full trying to preserve land. They can't manage buildings. The Monmouth County Genealogical Club doesn't have any money for things.

Ms. West: Saving land is most important. But as I sit around and look at all this, once it is gone, it is gone forever.

Mrs. Owen: That's right.

Ms. West: The craftsmanship is unbelievable. People can go to Home Depot and get plastic that resembles wood, but this is the real thing.

Mrs. Owen: People really admire this woodwork.

Ms. West: You can't help it. I didn't notice it the first time I was here this morning, but also look at the doorknob and the keyhole, the cover over the keyhole.

Mrs. Owen: It's porcelain.

Ms. West: And besides that, kids today peep through the keyhole, even with my children. And there is a cover over the keyhole. I looked at that and thought how wonderful. If somebody were building a home today, I could tell them to take the doors, and take this and that. This is your interview, so I can't say what I am thinking. When I get off the tape, though, I'll say a few things. (Llaughter) This house is just unbelievable, and when it is gone, it's gone forever.

Mrs. Owen: Under that afghan is my great-grandfather's sea chest.

Ms. West: Really?

Mrs. Owen: In it is his sextant and his diary. I haven't lifted the lid of it in years and years, and I pray that it is all right.

Ms. West: Your children will come get all of that, right?

Mrs. Owen: I don't know! I may give it to the Historical Association.

Ms. West: Oh, to preserve it, by all means. I bet a lot of people don't even know what a sextant is.

Mrs. Owen: I know it, isn't that the truth.

Ms. West: And to be able to see something like that and know what it was used for, wow. And the history here in this house is so great. I am looking at all the handwork that was done, and the wallpaper; don't ever take that down.

Mrs. Owen: Weren't we fortunate to find this wallpaper? When we came, there was a little store over in the mall. And that's where we got all the wallpaper. And for this room, isn't it perfect?

Ms. West: Ideal! If walls could only talk, it would be nice. But your home is really a home. It's not walking into some showroom. What advice would you give young people today if somebody were to ask for some advice?

Mrs. Owen: I would tell them to try to keep life as simple as possible. Try to have faith and keep that faith close to you, day in and day out. Try to be involved with your government, and really try to be with your children if you have any. You only have your children for so long, and they need you.

Ms. West: A lot of today's children act like they don't need you, but they do. And maybe more so than when you and I were coming up.

Mrs. Owen: That's right.

Ms. West: Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Mrs. Owen: Well, I have been so fortunate to have friends from Freehold. Dear Betty moved to Florida, and then to Virginia. Of course we don't see each other any more, but we write and phone. A friend in Freehold who lives in a wonderful house on East Main Street, and I talk on the phone, too. And there is another friend with whom I used to walk to school. She and I keep in touch. So those friendships mean a lot.

Ms. West: I'm sure they do. You and your husband have been married for fifty-eight years, and you have a lot of memories and things to share. If you could describe your life as a roadmap, how would you depict it?

Mrs. Owen: There have been ups and downs, of course. That's to be expected. But by the grace of God, we have gotten through the difficult times and are very thankful to have reached the point of living here. And truly I am living life as I believe I would have hoped to have lived. The other part was wonderful, all that traveling and meeting wonderful people in other countries and seeing beautiful places. But I guess home is where the heart is.

Ms. West: That's what they say, there's no place like home. Would you have wanted to change any phase of your life or would you leave it as it was?

Mrs. Owen: I would keep it the way it is.

Ms. West: The contentment.

Mrs. Owen: I am very thankful.

Ms. West: What are your deepest values?

Mrs. Owen: Faith in the good Lord, the family, and God's creations should be protected.

Ms. West: I gather this new millennium has you depressed. How would you like to see things in this millennium if you could make a change?

Mrs. Owen: I would like people really to understand the threat we humans are to the balance of life. We should be protecting the air. I shouldn't wake up at 6:00 a.m. in the spring and think why do I have this taste in my mouth, this awful chemical taste? The leaders who give their word to keep peace in countries, they should stick to their word. They should look after their people and not have them abused and killed for these political reasons. By the year 2000, we should have outgrown all that. And people should participate in government more. With the number of voters decreasing, it just isn't right. We are a country that is 225 years old, and so many lives have been given for our freedom. We should be taking responsibility to at least get out and vote. End of preaching! (laughter) There are many wonderful things, and I appreciate your participation in this wonderful

program for the Arts. We used to go to New Jersey Symphony Orchestra concerts in Red Bank, and enjoyed them so. We still do go to Monmouth Symphony Orchestra concerts, and we are very appreciative of that fine music. We used to go pretty faithfully to Monmouth Museum, but we don't get that far anymore. We are just slowing down. But that is another advantage of living in Monmouth County. We can go to Asbury Park, Red Bank for concerts, and see museum exhibits so easily.

Ms. West: There is an awful lot offered here.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, a great deal.

Ms. West: And there are so many things that don't even cost any money. I imagine a lot of us don't avail ourselves of what is out there for us. I must admit, it's a beautiful county. And it's full of history.

Mrs. Owen: Yes, it is.

Ms. West: We are kind of running out of tape, so let me thank you for allowing me to speak with you. I speak for the Library, of course, and not just myself. It was just wonderful meeting you and your husband. This has truly been my pleasure, you just don't know.

Mrs. Owen: Thank you very much.

The subject of the next part of this interview is Robert Irvins Owen. Mr. Owen was with the American Foreign Service with the State Department. His last foreign assignment was as an American Consul General in Zdegreb, Yugoslavia.

Mr. Robert Owen

Mr. Owen: My father and mother were in New Brunswick when I was born. My father was working at the Rutgers College Agricultural Experiment Station, and also in that period was the first Middlesex County Agricultural Agent. At one point he had been a poultry specialist. Since my mother thought he wasn't making enough money working for Rutgers, she wanted him to move. So he bought a used poultry farm in Bradevelt, Monmouth County on Newman Springs Road, across from the Dutch Reformed Church. We went there when I was about three or three and a half years old.

Ms. West: What town was that?

Mr. Owen: It was the Township of Marlboro in what is called the Bradevelt area. It was at one time a railroad stop on the way from Freehold to Matawan. It was

an old poultry farm, and it was overrun with rats. It was quite an interesting experience as we got it ready again for poultry. It was right next to a schoolhouse, which at that point was a one-room school with no running water with six grades in one room. By the time I was four and a half, my mother, who was so eager to get me off to Rutgers College, sent me over next door to school. Happily, I was only there in first grade for four or five months before the school was closed. The kids there were moved to Marlboro Grammar School in Marlboro Village, down the road toward Freehold about a mile. So that was very interesting.

Ms. West: How many grades were in the schoolhouse?

Mr. Owen: There were six grades in the little one I started out in. There were a lot of tough kids there, I tell you, from an area called Big Woods up the road. It was mostly children of immigrants from the Baltic States. But I still remember some of the experiences very vividly, and not always happily. Anyway, when we went to Marlboro, a school bus would come by and take me to school.

Ms. West: To get back to the one-room schoolhouse, did one teacher teach all six grades?

Mr. Owen: Yes. And there were two separate doors. One was on the east side for the boys to go in, and there was one on the west side for the girls to go in. On each side was like a little anteroom, with places to hang your coats in the wintertime. They had a five or six gallon bottle of water and paper drinking cups. In back were the outhouses, one for the boys and one for the girls. It was really good in the sense that both sexes were represented in the classes. But it worked out really quite well. Right next to the schoolhouse to the west, ran the railroad that went from Freehold to Matawan. That railroad ran partly alongside our property -- further back where we had our poultry houses and personal garden. We had six acres there. I might make the observation that when I came to Marlboro, it was a transition time in America, as well as in Monmouth County.

Ms. West: What year was that?

Mr. Owen: This was about 1924 or 1925. I don't remember too many details of that time, being that young. But I do remember there was still a long shed in the cemetery across the street. It was in an open area that is now filled in with graves. This shed was a sheltered parking place for horses and buggies. At that time, there was still at least one farmer who came with his family in a horse and buggy, and they would tie up the horse in that shed. It was a transition time on the farms because tractors were just being introduced to the farms. The farmers did not want to give up their horses, so most of them had both. They had a new tractor and at least one team of horses in their barns. I worked for one of those farmers in the summertime about eight or nine years later, and he still had a pair of horses there that he used for some things. At that time, that whole area was

agricultural. There wasn't hardly anyone living within a quarter of a mile or so from where we lived. There was a house that later became the head doctor's house, after remodeling. And that was the closest one to us. There was an Italian family there, and I knew the boy. He was a little bit older than I, and they didn't stay long enough for us to become very good friends. I had my first easy-over eggs there with him, and they ate any time of the day or night. If you got hungry, you went out to the kitchen and cooked some eggs or something. Our other neighbors were up on what we called Barkers Hill, but there were no children my age. The family there was named Barker, and they had a turkey farm. The hill is a peculiar geological formation there. I don't recall the name now, but that is where Camp Arrowhead of the YMCA is now. I used to go sledding there with friends. It was quite interesting, and we found fossils. There was a tributary of Big Brook at the end of our place in back, and it has had a lot of publicity lately because of fossils found there. We found this particular type of fossil that we called a "lightning bolt," and it actually was from an ancient squid or some other marine animal. But that whole area was agricultural with mainly one big crop, which was potatoes. But they also had truck farming, which meant a variety of vegetables that the farmers would take by truck into a city to sell in the markets. And they mostly took them to Newark or New York. Roads, like the one in front of our place, were macadam. And the road between Matawan and Freehold, Route 79, was paved, too. It was one of the early concrete roads, and there was no New Jersey Turnpike or Garden State Parkway at that time. But the other roads to the farms in the west, which is now mostly people and houses, were not paved. This area included the farms of the families who sent boys to the school that I attended in Marlboro. Some of them still had working outhouses. And only recently had they had electricity installed. That's six or eight farms there…the Whitson Farm, the McDowell Farm, and the Hayes Farm, among others. There must be hundreds of people now living where those farms were, if not even thousands, if you went far enough. Once I was old enough to ride a bicycle or ride a horse (which I had for a while), I would visit with those families. I remember the Hayes family, and the mother would churn her own milk and make her own butter. And in the little outhouse they still had Sears catalogues used for toilet paper, or even a few corn cobs which were sometimes used in lieu of toilet paper. But it was a good life. It wasn't primitive, although it may sound so today. In our own case, when we came to our house, we had a gas stove and an icebox. The ice man would come by maybe once a week, and you would have a sign in your window to show how many pounds you wanted. Then he would cut if off and bring it into the house. Of course, there were other people of that nature. There was the rag man, the man who would sharpen your scissors, and so on. I forget the name of the bakery, perhaps it was Dugan's Bakery, and his truck used to come by. It made more noise than most of the trucks on that road, and as a result, my dog was killed. He, Shep, never chased cars except that one bakery truck. I think he chased it because the man must have been mean to him at some point or other, or perhaps kicked at him when he delivered bread. When that dog died, we assumed it was probably that same bakery truck that hit him. Otherwise, Shep was very careful crossing the road and didn't chase any other

trucks. When the dog died, it really broke my heart. I suppose I was about eight years old, and we brought a stone from the cemetery to mark his grave in our yard. It was an unused stone that had been discarded. That cemetery was important to me. My family belonged to that church and I sang in the choir until my voice changed. But the cemetery was a playground for me where I would visit frequently. The first sexton was a lovely, old Irish gentleman, Henry Hardy. He wasn't old by my standards today, but he was old by my standards then: he had, at one point, worked briefly for my father, as long as my father could afford it. He also babysat me on occasion. But he was happy to have me come around the cemetery. If there had been a funeral and he was filling in the grave, which I believe he himself had probably dug, he would pay me ten cents to help him fill in the grave. And I did that.

Ms. West: What was the name of that church?

Mr. Owen: That was called The Old Brick Church, but it was really the Dutch Reformed Church of Marlboro. And it was the main Protestant church for Marlboro Village, but the people had to come a mile to get to it. It had no central heating or running water, and there was an outhouse out in back somewhere. That probably was used mostly by the sexton when he was there. Since there was no heating, it was only used during warm weather. In the wintertime, there was a chapel on Main Street in Marlboro Village that served as a church. Services and church suppers were held there, rather than the one that was across from our house. Our house is still there across from the church, but of course it is under different ownership now. And what used to be a poultry farm is now something else. I forget the name of it now. The new owners have a roadside stand for selling vegetables, flowers, etc.

Ms. West: How old would that house be today, do you have any idea?

Mr. Owen: It was not a very old house, but it's hard for me to remember in terms of my different attitude about time now than I had then. But I think it probably was built sometime in the early twentieth century, and it certainly wasn't new when we came there. But it had none of the characteristics of an old house; it was what you might call a bungalow. We had six and a half acres, a small barn, and three very long poultry buildings. Only a part of one remains today. One of them had a huge cellar, which is where my father had an incubator for baby chicks. It didn't work out too well. His whole poultry farm suffered when the bottom dropped out of the market for eggs and poultry during the Depression. But to keep in this pre-Depression period, it was also the Prohibition period. I recall that during the Depression, there were a lot of what you would call hobos or unemployed people roaming around and looking for work of some kind. There also were tramps, somewhat less reputable people, that went around. A lot of them, obviously, were alcoholics. Going to Marlboro Village sometimes in the early mornings, you would find empty sterno cans and liquor bottles on the sidewalk in front of what was the

old, small town hall. That hall was only used three or four times a year for meetings.

Ms. West: Can you explain the difference between a hobo and a bum to somebody who might be listening to this tape?

Mr. Owen: The ones I am just now speaking about were probably qualified to be considered bums. The words are somewhat interchangeable, but the word hobo referred primarily to the men who, during the Depression, were unemployed and traveled around hoping to find employment. They traveled through on trains by climbing on the freight cars, and so forth. And they might find seasonal work in some areas, like harvesting potatoes, etc. They were sort of migrant workers without steady employment. And they were often hungry men, who would stop and offer to do some work for a little food. I remember my mother always kept bologna in the icebox or refrigerator and extra bread, so that if someone came she would be able to give them a bologna sandwich and water at our pump.

Ms. West: Did they have their hobo camps around near the railroad?

Mr. Owen: Yes, they did. I remember one particular little camp. It was temporary, and they never stayed there more than a few nights. It was under a railroad trestle for that railroad between Bradevelt and Freehold. I remember sometimes walking along that railroad and being a little scared to cross the trestle, because you could see down through the ties some forty or fifty feet to the stream. And you could see where they had a campfire, and maybe they had stolen or been given a few potatoes or vegetables, and they would cook them there. We were never worried about them, really. They never bothered us, and they were almost invariably polite whenever they came to our place. Very often my mother would have them do some yard chore in return for something to eat, because she thought as a matter of principle it was better for them as well as for us. Sometimes they would only want a drink of water from our pump. We weren't bothered by them any more than we were bothered later on by the Marlboro State Hospital patients. The hospital property was right next to our house on the east side. The patients would be working outside, and sometimes they would come over for water. You would occasionally hear of ones that had taken "French leave" of the place and gotten over the fence and away. But there were never any instances in my childhood of any harm being done by any of them.

Ms. West: What type of a hospital was it?

Mr. Owen: It was a mental hospital. When it was being built, it was considered top of the line. It was one of the most modern and advanced hospitals in the state, if not the country. I was over there watching the construction before the fences were up. One of the first things they did was drill a well to find water, and they also started a water treatment and sewage plant. I was over watching them

drilling down through the different layers of soil and seeing what came up to the surface.

Ms. West: Do you know what year the hospital was built?

Mr. Owen: I forget now. It is still there physically, but they haven't decided fully what they are going to do with it. The Parks system has already bought some areas to the south of Newman Springs Road. And there are other various plans floating around, because there are a lot of good, substantial brick buildings there. As a matter of fact, I worked there. I knew people there, and my mother and father played cards with the doctors and their wives. But there were few children my age. The Stevenson family had a boy my age, Linford, and he had a younger brother and a sister. He had two younger brothers, Billy and Kenny. The father was in charge of the agricultural work. The hospital grew a lot food on the land, and the patients did much of the work under supervision. Mr. Stevenson was in charge of that aspect. By then, the Italian family's house had been fixed over for the head doctor, Dr. Gordon. The Hospital Superintendent was Robert Cox, and his son was my friend. The Superintendent was in charge over all the administration, and the head doctor was in charge of the medical operation. When it was being built, later on when I was a little older, there was the thought that I might get a job carrying water for the construction workers. At least my father and I thought it was a good idea, but it was vetoed by my mother. But I did work there during my college time at Rutgers. I was at Rutgers from the fall of 1937 until June of 1941. This must have been around 1938 that I worked at the hospital one summer. I worked for the head of stores, and I was his assistant. I helped him there, supervising four inmates who were able to help him regularly. On occasion, I also would have a gang of maybe eight or ten patients who would carry bulk foods from one building to the other underground in tunnels. It was a good experience, and a good way to spend the summer. I was paid the same rates as the "attendants" who monitored and helped the patients: fifty dollars a month plus room and board eligibility, which I didn't use.

Ms. West: Was there anybody in Monmouth County who had a profound influence upon your life?

Mr. Owen: A great many, actually. The first and earliest one that I can mention was Henry Hardy, who was the church sexton. He was perhaps the first Catholic I had known, and certainly the first tobacco-chewing Irishman I had known. He was a lovely man. If I had needed any teaching in tolerance, he would have helped me. But I don't think I was aware of any intolerance at that age. Another very important influence was a black man named Julius Stewart. He had come up from the South, and he was a very stocky, short man. He was very strong in his upper body, and he came and worked for a little while for my father. He fixed up and lived in one of the small poultry buildings. Later on, he also worked as sexton at the cemetery. But I remember him mostly because he was such a gentleman. I was maybe ten or eleven, and I went to work summers in the potato

fields picking potatoes. And he and I would often go as a team. A machine would dig the potatoes up, and the farmer had dropped off these empty barrels every certain number of feet. We would have to fill three heaping bushel baskets in order to fill one of those barrels, and those bushels were sixty pounds each. That meant that the barrel would weigh 175-180 pounds. You and your teammate would lift that big barrel up on the back of a truck. It wasn't so bad if it was an old-fashioned truck like a cart drawn by horses, because that was fairly low to the ground. But if it was a real automotive truck, you had to lift it about another foot to get it up on that truck. And it took quite exquisite teamwork to do that. I guess I must have been twelve by then, to do that. But that was not easy work. When the price was good for potatoes, say like ten cents a barrel, you could make five dollars a day or more. And you'd work maybe five hours or so, until it got too hot. The potatoes would scald if they got too hot. If you weren't coordinated exactly and one of you didn't lift at the right time or pull the right way, the other one got most of that weight. So I am lucky I don't have a bad back today as a result of that. I worked on another farm, and old Jake Stattel was the farmer when I worked there. Later, his son, Dan Stattel, took over the farm, and is now deceased. Mrs. Stattel was very nice, and she got them to pay me to help her around the place sometimes when there weren't potatoes to pick. I would get two dollars a day for ten hours, which was not exactly rolling in wealth, but I earned it. It might be the equivalent eight or more dollars now, I suppose. And that's per day, not per hour. But it was interesting growing up, and I enjoyed it.

Ms. West: And you graduated from what high school?

Mr. Owen: Freehold High School, which was the only high school in that area. I guess there are three or four high schools now. It covered that whole area back then, and I suppose we had maybe 120 students in our graduating class. There were probably fewer than 500 in the entire high school then.

Ms. West: Then you went to Rutgers University?

Mr. Owen: I went to Rutgers, and I never thought of going to any other university. My father had followed his older brother into Rutgers College. The older brother was class of 1904, and my father had to stay home and work on the farm until his brother got through Rutgers. In fact my father left high school after two years to work on the farm. Then he went back and took two years in one year to graduate from high school in upper New York State. Then he got a special New York State Regents Scholarship to go to Rutgers, and worked his way through entirely. He was the oldest and strongest man in his class, but his class was not huge. There were something like eighty students in the 1908 graduating class at Rutgers.

Ms. West: What did you major in at Rutgers?

Mr. Owen: I had done very well in math and science in high school, and got the science mathematics medal, and so on. But I didn't know what I wanted to do. I graduated at age sixteen from high school. Since I had done well in those subjects and my family knew the head of the Ceramics Department at Rutgers, ceramics seemed to embody what I was good in. So I figured I would try it out. Like a lot of things in life, you try it out and see if you like it. So I stayed in Ceramics for four years at Rutgers, and it was considered one of the toughest majors. In our particular class in the School of Ceramics, there were only eight or ten of us.

Ms. West: It was an Ivy League school at that time, right?

Mr. Owen: No, it was never actually an Ivy League school, and it's still not today. In 1766 it was founded. It was not quite an Ivy League college, but close. In any case, I was active in various things and sports while I was there. I might say here that I owe a great deal to my mother. Since we came to Marlboro from New Brunswick and she was a city girl, she didn't want me to become a "hick," so to speak, from living in the country. This was somewhat to my disadvantage, because, for example, she wanted me to wear shorts when other boys my age in Marlboro were wearing knickers. So I came into a certain amount of criticism from my peers, off and on. She would take me into New Brunswick for the dentist and Trenton for special clothes. I wanted to just be one of the fellows. But she wouldn't quite let me, and she kept telling me that I really had to work, study, get good grades and follow my father to Rutgers, etc. So when I went to Freehold High School, I was one of the people from the country. I wasn't in the social groups that had gone to school together in Freehold earlier, and it took me a while to break in. But because of my mother's influence, even though I was not particularly good at sports like baseball, I went out for baseball and joined clubs. And later on I went out for football, to prove something. I never did very well, but I was on the team for a couple of years. And then I realized that I had a lot of stamina for a young man, so I started running at track. They didn't have cross country then, they only had track. I turned out to be the best miler, relatively speaking, around. And that was because I could run a mile, and a lot of them couldn't get anywhere near a mile. Hitchhiking back and forth home from school also helped. I ended up being the Vice President of the class and got my little gold "F" and so forth. And I dated all the pretty girls, including my present wife. And I had a great time in high school. You might say I was a little mature for my age. But if it hadn't been for my mother, I probably would have had a very minor level of activity in high school, like most of the people who came from Marlboro. But she got me going, and once I got going, I liked it and developed.

Ms. West: Well, your ancestors…where did they come from?

Mr. Owen: My father's side has no Monmouth County background. They go back to the seventeenth century. I have a book of the Owen family that revealed where our first ancestor in this country supposedly was buried. Many, many years later,

I drove up there with several of our children. We did it on the way to visit somebody else. I guess it was my older son in Maine. We found the cemetery, and I offered the children a bonus dollar if they could find the grave of this first Owen ancestor, John Owen. And they found him in the cemetery. So that was interesting. I had a one-car accident in the cemetery, which was rather unusual.

Ms. West: A nice place to have an accident, right?

Mr. Owen: Well, I turned a corner too short and hit one of the car's fenders on a marked cornerstone. So I had to pay for that. The ancestors on my mother's side are many, many Monmouth County antecedents, because the name is Wright. There were a lot of Wrights around. You have heard, of course, of Wrightstown to the south. My great-great-grandfather was in Monmouth County and was quite an illustrious person, I gather. He bought this farm that is now called Merino Farm, which is out near Allentown in Monmouth County. It was quite a thing, this farm. His name was Samuel Gardener Wright. My grandfather, Joseph Brognard Wright, was his son, but he was the younger son. The older son kept the farm, and my grandfather left the farm. He moved around Monmouth County and worked at all sorts of jobs. At one point as a young man, he was working at Asbury Park. I think he was either delivering milk or newspapers, and he had a horse drawn delivery wagon of some sort. He kept moving all over the place. He sired a lot of children. He and my grandmother had twelve children, of whom only six survived. I guess one of those six survived long enough to reach his teens, but they moved around a lot. Most of his children were born back at or near the area of the old farm, according to our old family Bible. It may be at the same place, but with different names of the immediate locality where children were born there. Then Grandfather would go off somewhere else again, often visiting other relatives. My mother was actually born out in Iowa. My father used to tease her that there was probably some scandal involving my grandfather so that he felt it was useful to be out of the state for a while. That tale may have some validity, but I am not sure. Grandfather later had been in politics, and he had run for Mayor of New Brunswick. He wasn't particularly successful. I didn't really know him until he was in his seventies, and he couldn't see very well. Through older cousins, I understand that he was wonderful with children. But he finally ended up living in Farmingdale, New Jersey. I still haven't been there to locate his grave because late in his life he married his second wife, Sadie. I don't think my mother and her sisters approved of the marriage. The family name was Goodenoff, and they were an old Farmingdale family. It sounds like a Dutch name, but I don't know if it is or not. Anyway, we went once in a while to visit him in Farmingdale. They lived in a little house that must have gone back to the Revolution. The house is still in Farmingdale, but it has been moved to another location. For a while he ran a little store there. According to my mother, he was cheated because of being nearly blind. Kids would come in to the store, give him a dollar bill and tell him it was a five, and he would give them change. So that kind of thing happened. I remember visiting him and his second wife, whom I was

told to call Aunt Sadie, although she was my step-grandmother. They were sweet old people.

Ms. West: He traveled quite a bit around the County then?

Mr. Owen: As an adult, he traveled around New Jersey quite a bit. He ended up in real estate in New Brunswick. My mother spent a lot of her childhood being the person in the family whom everyone else could rely on to do most of the drudge work. She looked after her mother, who was sick much of her married life. You might say it was due to excessive childbirth (twelve births!). There was only one boy surviving to manhood in the group, Uncle Lester, and he became a freight train engineer. Uncle Lester used to come and visit us in Marlboro once in a while. I remember him as any child would because, as one of our few visitors, he always came with some little toy for me. This was usually a wind-up toy like the one you mentioned with Mickey Mouse swinging back and forth and little things that popped. After his first wife, my Aunt Anna, died, he would come alone. The family didn't approve of her too much, or at least my mother and her three sisters didn't. I don't remember her. They had a little Boston Terrier, Tiny, and after his wife's death, Uncle Lester turned him over to us, and we kept him at our place. He was a very nice but very stubborn little dog.

Ms. West: Besides your home where you grew up, is there any part of the County that has any particular significance to you?

Mr. Owen: Well, is Fort Dix in Monmouth County?

Ms. West: No.

Mr. Owen: Well, Sea Girt is in Monmouth County. There used to be the Governor's summer 'White House' in Sea Girt. There was also a military area there. In high school, one of my best friends, Frank Bartron, had an older brother who was in the Air Guards 119th or 118th Operation Squadron operating out of Newark. And they had summer training camps down at Sea Girt some years. Other times it was at Camp Dix. But one time when it was in Sea Girt - I remember when they had their two weeks camp, they would hire a couple of civilian boys to help out in their kitchen. They employed a cook from Newark and several of his people, but then they had a couple of boys to help out. In this case, Frank and I went and worked there. We helped them set up the tents on the grounds of the Sea Girt camp grounds, and then once it got started, we were peeling potatoes, helping clear dishes off of tables, or whatever needed to be done.

Ms. West: Do you have any heroes or heroines?

Mr. Owen: I suppose if you want to, you could say that Lindbergh was one of our heroes. I remember when he crossed the Atlantic, and we would hear about him on the radio. And we would see his pictures in the papers.

Ms. West: What do you mean when he crossed the Atlantic?

Mr. Owen: Well, he was the first pilot to cross the Atlantic in a single engine plane. It was about 1927 as I recall.

Ms. West: And he went from where to where?

Mr. Owen: He started from some airport in Long Island, I think, and ended up in Paris, or some place near there. I am just sort of recalling what I can. But he was a real All-American Hero. Later on, of course, we were glued to our radios when the reports came in about the kidnapping of his little baby. We were, of course, here in New Jersey then. And we listened to whatever they told us about the trial, and it was a big "to do." We were also here when the Graf Zeppelin went down in Lakehurst later on. Then there was the Morro Castle disaster off Asbury Park. The impending war was coming on, but in high school we just didn't think much about it when we heard about Mussolini and Hitler. We were so involved in our own teenage lives that these other things sort of washed over us.

Ms. West: Who was the first President that you remember?

Mr. Owen: I remember Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, but I didn't see either one of them. We heard about them, and of course Hoover had the misfortune to be President when the Depression came. He seemed, apparently, to be a little indecisive and didn't know what to do. But that was a pretty difficult situation. Then Roosevelt came in and did all sorts of interesting things and experiments, and some worked and some didn't. But at least he got us going again and had a more optimistic view. I suppose it's partly because of this that both my wife and I are Democrats although we both came from solid Republican families. Mary's uncle had been the Republican Mayor of West Long Branch.

Ms. West: Do you remember the New Deal?

Mr. Owen: Oh, I remember the New Deal all right. For one reason, I was a stamp collector. They came out with a whole series of different stamps. The regular three cent stamp had the big NRA on it, for the National Recovery Administration, etc. I certainly remember the Depression. That was maybe one reason I have had the deserved reputation of being a bit close with money. Well, if it is related to anything, it's related to that time when we just didn't have very much. We made do with a lot of things without suffering to any extent, but I remember all these people who were worse off coming to the house looking for work and handouts, etc. The pre-Depression era was the Prohibition period. There was a

lot of bootlegging going on, and there was a lot in the papers and radio about their operations. People who never drank before started drinking, I guess, just because it was harder to get the stuff. It was more fashionable, and things like martinis were introduced. My parents didn't drink, but I suppose occasionally there was some homemade wine. But there was a lot of crime related to bootlegging, and I guess that's how the Mafia and other crime groups really got their start. My family didn't approve of our relatives in Freehold because they had access to alcohol through bootlegging. My father told me years later that when he had the poultry farm and was selling eggs, he was approached by that element and asked if he would use his connections in shipping eggs to places to include forbidden liquor, etc. He turned them down because he was a very moral person, but it would have been really nice additional income for my family, I'm sure. But he was a very honest person, and we didn't have liquor in the house except wine very occasionally. And there was no profanity in our house.

Ms. West: Were you a great reader when you were young?

Mr. Owen: I have always been a very great reader. I read every book we had in our own little modest library. As a little boy I was reading adult materials by the time I was seven or eight years old. I soon discovered that these friends of ours on Barkers Hill had a walk-in closet on the second floor. It was as big as this room but narrower, and it was just absolutely full of paperbacks of the most exciting types. There were ones about World War II airplane exploits and ones like Argosy, which was an adventure magazine. They weren't nearly as pornographic as everyday reading is today by any means. Downstairs in their library in their bookcase, they had quite a few adult books.

Ms. West: Did you have a favorite author?

Mr. Owen: All of them. I was reading Raphael Sabatini when I was eight and nine years old. Earlier my family got me books, and I read the X Bar Boys set and another set on submarines. Then in high school, when we had to read books for credit for English, all the hard books got much more credit. So I read almost all of Dickens in high school, because I could get sixty points for one of those books instead of twenty points for something else. I missed out in my operating and professional years because I just didn't have time to do much reading. I was too busy doing other things. I would say I have read several hundred books since I retired. It's a wonderful library system they have here in Monmouth County; I am mostly using the West Long Branch Library. When we were celebrating our bicentennial, I was seeking out library books relating to our history, particularly the Revolutionary history. Now rather than always reading best sellers, I confess that I have come around to a lazy but interesting way of looking over the discarded books at the library that one time were free and now are something like fifty cents. If I see something I'm interested in, I buy it. So it has given me a great variety. Now and then I read books related to my overseas experience. Here's one about Moscow. We were there in Moscow during both the Stalin

period and the Krushev period. And I remember a lot of these things. Often when I was in Washington, I was on the Soviet Desk. I was a Soviet Desk Officer, and later on the Deputy Director for Soviet Affairs in the State Department. I was in Moscow twice, and our youngest son was born in Moscow. That wasn't on purpose, but he came early --Thanksgiving instead of Christmas.

Ms. West: How many children did you have?

Mr. Owen: We have had three boys and a girl. Only one boy was born in the United States. The oldest boy was born in the Dominican Republic, and the girl was born in Nuremberg, Germany. The next boy got his start, you might say in Germany, but was born in Bethesda, Maryland, and then our youngest one was born in Moscow, which is a whole story in itself.

Ms. West: How did you get involved with the Foreign Service?

Mr. Owen: Purely by accident. After Rutgers, I did a year's graduate work at MIT, working on my Doctor of Science Degree in the Department of Metallurgy. The Navy came along and was offering people commissions at the beginning of World War II, and they told me they wouldn't think of taking me until after I got my advanced degree. They figured I would be much more valuable to them then. And of course, three months later, I got my orders and went for three and a half years into the Navy. I was in a technical specialty relating to engineering. My wife tried to encourage my coming back by writing to President Roosevelt telling him it was "time my husband came home." And that's the first time she wrote a President, but she has written every President since then. We still have one of the answers from Roosevelt's office in our scrapbook. After I came back from the South Pacific, I came down with infectious hepatitis. It was before they knew much about it, but there were thousands of returning veterans who came down with it. The only thing you could do for it n those days was complete bed rest and a fat-free diet. So I was in a hospital in New York. I had been back a month before I came down with it. I had been working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. So then I was in the hospital on this horrible diet, and I was getting thoroughly sick of raspberry Jell-O. We got a notice that came through the mail channels, and it was very slow getting to me. It was a Navy notice about this opportunity to take an examination for the American Foreign Service. I didn't even know what it was at the time. So that one particular afternoon, when my wife visited me in the hospital, we decided it wouldn't hurt to apply. I didn't want to go back to MIT and finish up on my doctorate, even though they were holding a place for me. I wanted to be working with people. I read countless books when I wasn't too busy overseas on little tropical islands. Anyway, I read lots of books on all the things I had missed out on in engineering education like botany, history, etc. So we decided to send the application in. Later I found out that when they received it in the State Department, they thought I was sort of a crazy fellow. I had given them this long list of things I read overseas instead of academic credits. So they wanted to see if I could pass the exam and gave me a chance. I took the exam. I

was half an hour late getting to the right place, because they had switched the places for the exam, and it was a whole day exam. But I was relaxed and just took it as a mental exercise. They didn't tell me how I did right away, so I went and did some graduate work at Princeton in International Affairs. Then they told me I had passed that exam. They asked me if I would like to take the oral examination in Washington on a certain date, or I could postpone until I finished my work at Princeton. I told them I would take it, and my wife and I went to Washington on a train. I passed the oral exam and was offered a position at the most junior level for an officer, like a second lieutenant. So I thought I would try it and see how I liked it. Well, thirty years later, I retired. We have strayed quite a bit from talking about Monmouth County. I had an aunt and uncle who lived on Broad Street in Freehold. At that point, you could see the racetrack area from their front porch. There was just a jungle of weeds and little trees between them and the racetrack, which is now houses, of course. When they had Fourth of July fireworks, you could sit on their front porch and watch the fireworks at the racetrack. That was rather special.

Ms. West: Did you have any hobbies when you were a youngster?

Mr. Owen: I suppose you could say so. I was interested in stamp collecting for awhile. My mother's oldest sister, Emma, lived in Trenton. She married very late someone who was considerably her junior and really had no gainful means of support. He was a cultured, educated man with a moustache, which was rare in those days. He came from a very good Trenton family, which commended him considerably. We never had a chance to talk very much with her around, but he was a good husband to her, I guess. He had come in to all these stamps that he collected as a boy and inherited some from someone else. At one stage, he gave me several books of these stamps. They were mostly American stamps, and one or two pre-Revolutionary stamps. So that gave my collecting quite a boost. He also gave me a huge collection of shells from all over that he had acquired. They were all in little cases with glass on top with labels, etc. But it was a little bit jumbled, and I was too young. The first thing you know, they got more jumbled. And there was never anything made of them, and they were eventually thrown out, I suppose. The stamps were a hobby, but certainly the shells never became one. I was so active, particularly in high school, that I didn't have much chance for hobbies. Walking back after track practice, I picked up matchbox covers. So I had quite a collection of different matchbox covers. But then at one stage, I was getting bored with that. I dated a girl in high school named Katherine Chagaris who had a younger brother that was collecting matchbooks. So I gave the whole batch to him.

Ms. West: How long have you and your wife been married?

Mr. Owen: We married in 1942 at the Rutgers Chapel. The Dean officiated at our wedding and we walked out of the chapel under crossed swords, because at that point, I was just graduating from Fort Schuyler Naval Training School up north in

the Bronx somewhere. I was sent there for my first training assignment in the Navy. There were eight or ten of us in my unit, and they borrowed swords from the instructors. That same uncle in Trenton had been a Navy Ensign in World War I, and still had some of his uniform and his sword. So his sword was used among those swords that were held in an arch for us. The reception was at Woodlawn at Douglass, which is quite an estate. My wife was working there that year while I was at MIT. So that was really quite fancy. We took a train to New York for our honeymoon, and we stayed at one of the hotels there. Then we got up very early on Monday morning so I could get back to Fort Schuyler, where we had our last strength tests, etc.

Ms. West: If you could describe your life as a roadmap, how would you describe it?

Mr. Owen: There were a lot of detours, but it was sort of focused on the central highway of career service, being a parent, raising a family, and adjusting to the special needs of living abroad so much in often a hostile climate. Educating children in the Foreign Service, moving around from place to place, is very much like it is in the military when they move from post to post. Except in our case, almost all the posts were abroad. My last post abroad was in Yugoslavia. I was the American Council General responsible for Croatia and Slovenia. I wasn't under close observation or supervision by the Embassy in Belgrade. The recent events there have been very painful for us with all the killings and racial divisions. It was an extremely interesting life in the Foreign Service. I always like variety, and I certainly had variety. I started out as an Administrative Officer, then I had Public Affairs responsibilities while I was still an Administrative Officer. Then I was the Economic Reporting Officer and a Labor Reporting Officer in Finland. I was a Political Reporting Officer in Moscow, and had more Public Affairs responsibilities, in a sense, there. Later, I had sort of Intelligence related responsibilities in charge of an office in Germany during the period of the Hungarian uprising. My team would interview detectors and refugees for matters of interest to the State Department. So it has been an interesting variety. And in the Foreign Service I had a lot of responsibility right from the start.

Ms. West: What would you say is your greatest achievement?

Mr. Owen: I couldn't really pick one out. Both my wife and I have been extremely active in Monmouth County and the state, in environmental related issues in most cases. She has been strictly environmental, and I was on the Citizen's Advisory Board for the Manasquan Reservoir Project when that came along. My group had opposed developing it because we thought the same amount of water could be achieved through water conservation methods. When it turned out we couldn't stop it, I "joined up," becoming Chairman of the Environmental Task Force of the Citizens Advisory Board for the project.

Ms. West: What year was that?

Mr. Owen: In July they are going to be celebrating their twentieth anniversary of the reservoir having been completed.

Ms. West: You have been involved since its inception, right?

Mr. Owen: I was involved before the first shovel was dug. This might have been one of the more important things I have done in life. We made it a much more environment-friendly reservoir than it might have been otherwise. It's not just a hole filled with water. There is a beautiful County-run park around it. There are no motor boats to pollute the water, it's only sail boats or non-gasoline powered boats. There are horse trails, too. I am proud of that. I'm also proud of what I did in Yugoslavia. There was no schooling for English speaking children there. People suggested to me how wonderful it would be to have an American school there. So I got support from the State Department to establish a school there. So I am really the founder of the American school there. At one stage there were maybe thirty children in eight grades, and we had several teachers and some aides. We had maybe five or six different nationalities; it wasn't just Americans.

Ms. West: Is there anything else you would like to accomplish?

Mr. Owen: I have gathered quite a lot of genealogical information about our families. I have a whole file of miscellaneous papers that need to be organized and then followed up on. That's one of my ambitions. And I am fulfilling another ambition today talking to you. I have a lot of memories of various periods in my life that I would like to get down on the record. Some years ago, I started trying to give my children a lot of this information I have bottled up in me. They didn't seem all that interested, so I started writing it in a form that could be used in the Asbury Park Press "Remember When" column. I must have had maybe fifty pieces printed in the Press over the years. Then I sent copies to the children so they would get it that way. I hope to have the discipline soon to spend the time to get this information down. I may participate in an ongoing oral history project at the State Department. I did participate in one at Rutgers on History Archives of World War II.

Ms. West: Well I thank you for sharing your memories with us today. This has been extremely interesting.