



Interview with Stephen Higgins

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
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Ms. Higgins: Good afternoon, Stephen.

Mr. Higgins: Hi, Mom.

Ms. Higgins: What are your first memories of growing up in Monmouth County?



Stephen Higgins



Stephen on his bicycle

Mr. Higgins: Lone Oak Road, Waterman's field. The Mateys and the Mahoneys and the Cumings and the Sonnenfelds and the Fullertons. My first memories are of my dad pushing me down the street on a bicycle and the street didn't have pavement. It just had round stones stuck in the street with tar. That was great, because later we used to take his car out from between the stones. There was an apple orchard at the end of the turnaround. That was great because I used to go with Freddie Sonnenfeld, who is three or four years older than me, and he used to have a kite that would do loops and all this stuff. We used to fly it around the apple trees. We used to climb the apple trees and pick the apples. Nobody was harvesting them. I guess the land had already been sold to the development to come. We used to hang out with the Moores a lot too. They owned the last farm in Monmouth County; it seemed to me at the time.

Ms. Higgins: Did you start school there when you lived there?

Mr. Higgins: I went to Harmony one year. One year I went to another school.

Ms. Higgins: Schools were getting crowded in Monmouth County in the 1950s and there were split sessions because Monmouth County was growing so rapidly. Do you remember anything about there being a lot of children in the schools?

Mr. Higgins: Oh, we had a great time. Of course, we had hall patrols of kids. In the schools, we use to form all kinds of gangs to play. I remember we had one big gang. We really didn't do much of anything, except hang out and wonder what to do. (Laughs) Or go to the creek across the other side of Brigadoon and wander around the marshes -- and up in the very end, after they tore down apple orchard to make a new development. At the very, very end of that development of a park. Was it Harmony Park? I think. At that time, I was starting to fly model airplanes inspired by Sean Moore, who had quite a few of those. In back of that park was a jungle that went forever. That jungle went all the way to Louie's Bar, on Route 35. The road followed it all the way up where it curved over to the right to that kind of a park at the very end, the Plaza Park, where there is a ball field and basketball hoop. And we used to try and fly model airplanes there. But the jungle behind was so impenetrable that nobody had ever made it to Louie's Bar. Because it was an impenetrable swamp. It was so big and so long. You would go back there until your feet were wet and you were full of mud and knew your mom was going to kill you when you got home. But you never made it out to Route 35. Never. Ever and ever. It was impossible. I don't how if anybody ever did make it. Or if they had to use a bulldozer to open a path in an African jungle technique.

Ms. Higgins: Maybe it's still there.

Mr. Higgins: It could still be there. (Laugh)

Ms. Higgins: What were your mothers doing?

Mr. Higgins: Really I don't know. I wasn't there. I guessed they were worrying about us. (Laughs) Sometimes I wonder how my parents let me go to such extremes. Now I'm a parent and I watch my kids. And I think every minute when I was twelve years old, I was going fifty miles away from home. Kid's life for me and then I would go home. (Laughs)

Ms. Higgins: Someone I interviewed just the other day said, "The children were free. From the time they were about three, we'd say, 'Go out and play.' They went out the door and went out and played." That certainly isn't the way it is in Monmouth County anymore. On another subject, Monmouth County is known for its seashores. Do you remember much about the seashore?



**Stephen Higgins with brother,
Ted, at the beach**

Mr. Higgins: It seems in the summer there were about two or three or four or five days a week we went to the beach. In whatever car that was... what was it? Some kind of.... I can't remember. I remember one time, I tried to start it up in the garage. Do you remember anything about that?

Ms. Higgins: No. Thank God.

Mr. Higgins: Maybe it was dream. Maybe it was a dream, but I remember being in the garage and trying to start a car. The keys were in the ignition -- nobody ever took the keys -- and the motor was turning over. And I remember you coming and starting to scream at me, "Get out of the car. What are you doing in the car?" And the motor was turning over and I had no idea how to put in drive or anything like that.

Ms. Higgins: That's a good thing. Probably would have driven off to the beach. (Laughs)

Mr. Higgins: When we lived in the development on Lone Oak Road, I used to mix up soap powders and bleach and strange things and set them on fire, trying to make great chemical reactions. I remember drying oak leaves to make cigarettes with Claire. You have to remember that, over the barbecue in the back. Remember we had the barbecue on a couple of cinder blocks and a grill that was in the backyard there with that circular thing. It used to be the case thing that you put kids in. Eventually when we grew up, we rolled it up and made a fort out of it.

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember the Heath family?

Mr. Higgins: Yes. Billy and I used to explore the impenetrable forest. His house was on the other side. You could get to his house from that park. (Was that Memorial Park, Harmony Park?) There were pine woods, and you could pass that way. But the way out to Route 35 was just too much. Yes, we use to make forts in the woods. I saw him seven years ago or so. I was having a beer in The Cove, a bar there, and he came in. I didn't recognize him at first.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about some of the other friends you made there in Middletown. Did you have friends you watched TV with or went bike riding with?

Mr. Higgins: All of them.

Ms. Higgins: Was Mickey Mouse Club the big thing then?

Mr. Higgins: Yes. We had just gotten the television. I remember *The Crawling Eye*. (Laugh) *The Crawling Eye*: what a great movie. I was so terrified that I had to turn off the television

Ms. Higgins: How long did you live in Lone Oak Road in Middletown?

Mr. Higgins: I started the fifth grade in Highlands at the Highlands Elementary School. That was fun. I meet a whole bunch of different people there. Who did I meet at first? Let's see: Mr. Espenshade, he was pretty good. I wonder what he is doing now?

Ms. Higgins: Did they have a music program there in the Highlands?



Stephen Higgins in 1965 when he began playing clarinet

Mr. Higgins: That's when I began to play the clarinet. Some guy came and went on the stage with all the instruments. He played a clarinet, he played a saxophone, and he played a trumpet and a violin. He was some kind of salesman. He wanted everybody to sign up to play instruments. He would rent them the instruments. Everybody could get in line and if they wanted to pick an instrument. And then they had a music teacher in school, and we started to play music. Maybe that was in Lone Oak I started to play; I can't remember which school it was where I was introduced to the instruments. I think it was in Harmony School because I remember Roger Baker there. I picked up the clarinet and he picked clarinet also. But he changed to the saxophone pretty quickly. His dad was a saxophone player. I see him every once in a while. He was playing saxophone. He was really talented.

Ms. Higgins: Do you still play the clarinet or the sax?

Mr. Higgins: Rarely, if ever, either one. I was trying to help some beginning sax players the other day. We went down with some guitar players and a bass player and two of these guys who had only played the saxophone for a couple of years. But they are really dedicated. One guy is about thirty and the other guy is about twenty-two or twenty-three. I haven't played for a long time, but I really got to show him some tricks.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about when your school went up to the World's Fair.

Mr. Higgins: Oh, when I got lost. Well, I played the clarinet solo "Maria" in the New Jersey Pavilion on one day. Then we went another day and somehow I got lost. I was walking along with my teacher, talking to her very, very animated. I was very animated. "This and that, blah blah blah blah," and I finally looked up and this lady I had never seen before in my life was



looking down at me. And I said, "Where's my teacher?" And I looked around and there was nobody I knew anywhere within a thousand miles. What happened here?

Ms. Higgins: How did you get home?

Mr. Higgins: I went to my grandparents' house. Well, after finally looking for my group and not finding them. And talking to the police. And they said, "Here is a lost kid," and really I don't know how they got my grandparents' phone number. Did they talk to you guys?

Ms. Higgins: Eventually.

Mr. Higgins: I think I gave the police my grandparents' name. And I think I had known the address because I had been there several times. So then I went and got together with them. Everyone was very mad at me. I don't know why. They said I got lost on purpose to go see my grandparents. Really, all my friends said "You did it on purpose to go see your grandparents."

Ms. Higgins: Do you remember how you got to the World's Fair that day?

Mr. Higgins: On the City of Keansburg. That was a ferry boat. It wasn't a very big ferry. You could put maybe fifteen cars on there. I remember going to get on and going in the line to get on. It was green and white. It was pretty neat, actually. The pier is long gone.

Ms. Higgins: After the Highlands Elementary School, where did you go the high school?

Mr. Higgins: I went to Henry Hudson Regional High School from the seventh grade on.

Ms. Higgins: That was a pretty new school at the time, wasn't it?

Mr. Higgins: I was in the second or third seventh grade class.

Ms. Higgins: What are your most outstanding memories of Henry Hudson Regional High School?

Mr. Higgins: Mom, could I not answer that question? (laughs). What are my memories of Henry Hudson? (Lots of laughter) Well, being in *Oklahoma*. That was a big part.

Ms. Higgins: Who directed that?

Mr. Higgins: Bob Waldron, who was really a great guy. I played Curly. Yeah, he gave me the lead, even though I was only a sophomore. I didn't do too bad either.



Stephen Higgins in a school production of Oklahoma, 1969

Ms. Higgins: Henry Hudson was also known for its gymnastic team. Did you do gymnastics?

Mr. Higgins: Yeah, I did some gymnastics with the team and practiced every night. But I never competed with them. I never got to the high school team. I was seventh and eighth grade. By the time high school came we were all hippies. School didn't matter any more.

Ms. Higgins: What were you doing?

Mr. Higgins: Oh, everything imaginable that hippies did. Playing the guitar. Playing hookey. Drinking beer. Smoking whatever substances happened to be handy. There was a semi lost sort of an ethic in those days. Everybody started to go crazy.

Ms. Higgins: You mentioned the music scene, was that about the time Bruce Springsteen got started?

Mr. Higgins: We went to a few concerts of his before he was ever known or famous or anything. Kyle was one group of musicians. Steel Mill used to play at Clearwater pool and they were really good.

Ms. Higgins: Did Bruce Springsteen ever play at Clearwater Pool?

Mr. Higgins: Two times.

Ms. Higgins: Two times and you all knew he was good?

Mr. Higgins: Well, you didn't have to know he was good. He was already like the Monmouth County legend at the time. But he did some really, really good stuff. Probably better than what he is doing now.

Ms. Higgins: Really!

Mr. Higgins: Now he is so commercial and tired and he's getting to where he doesn't have the same enthusiasm as he did. But I went to two concerts of his that were really, really, really good. Really good. Clearwater Pool, when Tinker was his soundman and the most modern Phil Stokes had was a round button to look at the sound (laughs).

Ms. Higgins: And he played his own stuff?

Mr. Higgins: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: Did you hear any of his own stuff that got to be famous later?

Mr. Higgins: I really couldn't remember.

Ms. Higgins: Did you play any places yourself?

Mr. Higgins: Sometimes, I used to play at The Trolley. They had three places where we could just get up and play. People would take turns. What's the name of the place in Red Bank? The very end of Main Street where it ends at Kislins. It was called something like the Trolley Stop. Then it was JTs. It traded owners a lot of times. There were three stages. We used to play there a lot. And where else? We played at Clearwater Pool for some high school dances with Jerry Dragon and Tommy McCaffrey. Tom McCaffrey is another guy I would like to see. Oh, I remember playing for a dance at the Rumson Country Club with Tom and Jerry and Roland Krueger. Was that encouraging!



Stephen Higgins, second from right, 1969

Ms. Higgins: Stephen, was there any sort of rituals or rites of passage that adolescents had to do in Highlands?

Mr. Higgins: No, not really.

Ms. Higgins: Someone from Highlands the other day was telling me about teenagers jumping off the bridge.

Mr. Higgins: Yeah, but that wasn't a rite of passage, that was just something to do on the weekends. There was one guy, I think his name was Jim Perry. I think he is finally is dead. He was in jail for a long time for killing someone. I think he got murdered himself. This was a really weird guy. But you know he wasn't a dumb weird guy. He was kind of an all right sort of weird guy. And it didn't end up that he did those things because he was so bad. It was just kind of his life. But he hung on to that bridge when it was opening one time. A sailboat was going by and he was hanging on the part underneath. And the bridge opened up all the

way and he was all the way up there hanging on. And he couldn't let go, because the sailboat was going under him. But finally he hung on long enough and the sailboat went past and he let go. And that was the biggest dive of all the history of Highlands, I would have to say.

Ms. Higgins: That must have been quite a jump.

Mr. Higgins: That guy was out of his mind. I mean really totally out of his mind. Some of these people are totally crazy.

Ms. Higgins: Did you go surfing?

Mr. Higgins: Whenever I could. We could spend weeks on ends at the beach without even coming home sometimes all weekend. Going to fish for striped bass all weekend, sometimes with those two Black guys. What was that one guy's name? Fred, Fishing Fred, who came and drank with my dad when he brought us home. We used to go fishing with him. (laughs)

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever catch anything?

Mr. Higgins: Well, they did. (laughs) My brother Ted and I would go on Friday night and come home Sunday.

Ms. Higgins: Yes, we trusted you with Fishing Fred.

Mr. Higgins: He was all right. He was all right. He was a pretty neat guy. He had a station wagon, but he used to say, "This is my fishing car; I usually drive around in a Mack truck." I guess that was his job or something. He was truck driver.

Ms. Higgins: Did you fish inland?

Mr. Higgins: Yes, with The Great Arnie. He was good. He was good. He introduced Ted and me to molded catfish bait. And how to make rocks and twigs and bait and things disappear in your bare hands. He would bait a hook and then there would be no hook or anything.

Ms. Higgins: There's a big tower out there at Atlantic Highlands and I heard that some teenagers during that era tried to get on top of it.

Mr. Higgins: Tried? I've been there a few times.

Ms. Higgins: Not to the top of the big tower!?

Mr. Higgins: To the very top. And you know those red lights that they have on the very top? I climbed the mast and touched the light on the very, very top. They

have to change the light bulbs there, so there has to be a way up. I've been there.

Ms. Higgins: Why?

Mr. Higgins: Because it was there. (laughter)

Ms. Higgins: Amazing.

Mr. Higgins: Oh, we had parties at the base of that tower. (laughter) I remember one time we were going up that tower with Mickey and... who was Mickey's friend? He was a lot better guy than Mickey. Who else? Jerry and Penny were with us. We started to go up and those guys down there were throwing snowballs at us. And we are climbing up this little ladder and they are throwing these big snowballs. But after a while they were smaller snowballs. After awhile the snowballs were hitting behind your feet. And after awhile you could see those guys and they were still throwing snowballs. Going like brink, clink, brink.....It takes a long time to climb that tower. It takes a long time to get up there. That thing has to be three hundred feet high. You go past the equipment, all these gears and microwaves, stingers and stuff that they have. You can hear it go bbbsssswwweeee. (laughter)



Stephen Higgins and Betty Jo on Prom Evening, 1969

Ms. Higgins: Stephen, tell us about proms back there in the 1970s.

Mr. Higgins: The only prom I ever went to was to Betty Jo Timmer's prom. I would love to see Betty Jo. She was one of the good guys.

Ms. Higgins: Was your family involved in the education system there in Highlands?

Mr. Higgins: My dad was President of the Board for some years. I'm sure I caused him some embarrassment. I remember my youth. What do you know? (Laughs) I wasn't exactly a star student and I

was known to be sort of a cut-up. And I hung around with the basically wrong crowd. Well I don't know if they were wrong, but they certainly were different. Anyway, I'm sure that was kind of tough for Dad at times. Especially when we lifted all the speakers from the outside of the school for our rock group.

Ms. Higgins: Excuse me. You did what?

Mr. Higgins: There were speakers outside the school to make announcements about fire drills and stuff like that. Big orange speakers.

Ms. Higgins: And you took them?

Mr. Higgins: Yes. One night, we went and stole them all to use them for our rock group, because we didn't have speakers. We didn't have a dime to buy speakers. And then, my good friend the principal, Harold Schiabe, called me down to the office. I don't know how he had any idea that I had anything to do with the theft of the speakers. But he said, "Stephen, we know you did it." And I don't think he really knew we did it. But I'm such a pushover that under pressure, under the hot lights, I cave in. I said, "Okay, they will be back." So we brought them all back and nobody said anything. I don't know how he knew that. How did he know that? Maybe because we were really the only guitar players in the whole school who would want speakers. Mr. Schiabe wasn't bad.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about some of the other teachers.

Mr. Higgins: Oh, they were a lot of fun. But the best was one was Mr. Cherry. What can you say about Mr. Cherry? I liked Mr. Cherry a lot. He was our shop teacher. He use to prowl around in corners and stuff and try and catch people smoking. And one time I almost got suspended because I figured, "I'm gonna draw this guy out." I went behind the mobile classroom. We had so many students at the time that we had twelve mobile classrooms. They were like trailers. I was outside and doing my hand like this, because everybody did their hands like this with a cigarette. I just went out back of the mobile trailer and going like this. "I caught you", he said. I said, "No, look." And he said, "What are you, a magician?" And he smelled my breath and everything. And after awhile he realized that I was just kind of fooling with him. He was a nice guy. Mr. Cherry was a nice guy. And Mr. Levadusky --he was my other shop teacher -- was also a good guy.

Ms. Higgins: How about your English teachers?

Mr. Higgins: I remember my English teacher, Mr. Christopher. He was like the cop in class. You could never imagine him doing drugs, but he really did . It's just hard to believe, because he was like the big narc. I remember him and Jerry Dragon one time got into...Cause this was in the 1960s and everybody thought Christopher was a narc. We thought he was looking in our lockers. Maybe he was looking in our lockers for drugs. I don't know; we thought he was a cop. We thought he was like the nastiest narco squad guy around. To find out later that he himself was messing around with all that stuff was a shock... anyway.

Mr. Higgins: The hours we spent in the library were very few. What I remember about the library was it was big. They had a lot of good books and we planted pot seeds in the rubber tree. And they started to grow.

Ms. Higgins: Did they come up? Tell us about the police force there in the Highlands. Was there some kind of stoppage at the school? What was that called? A strike?

Mr. Higgins: No, that was a gang fight. That was all organized by David Butler.

Ms. Higgins: Tell us about that.

Mr. Higgins: David Butler had a lot of influence at that school at one time. He was the most twisted genius, a weirdo, a kind of strange person: something between normal people and the subhuman. What was going on then? I don't even remember, because I wasn't even a part of it. What was going on? I don't know who there was, but a lot of kids showed up on the corner with things like table legs and chains. And it wasn't anything to do with the school. Somebody stole something from somebody and that whole group of people then was branded as subhuman. It was like the Eugene Mitchell, Steve Monollee, Gary Wallcots, I don't remember all of them. Anyway, somebody at the school saw us all there, yelling and screaming with weapons. And they sent for the police, and they said, "Go home or we'll make Penn State look like a Sunday school picnic." It was great. (laughter). I wasn't close to all the action at that time. I was kind of like, "I'll be a bystander here." That's cool.

Ms. Higgins: Thank you, Stephen for sharing these memories of growing up in Monmouth County during the middle part of the 20th Century. It has been very interesting!

Mr. Higgins: Thank you for including me in your oral history program. I enjoyed speaking with you.