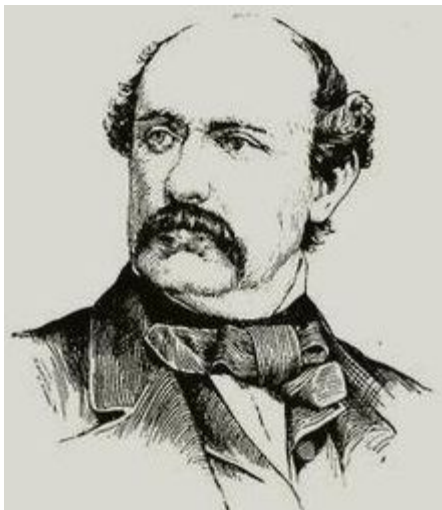


Conversation with Bob Spear
Multi-Generational Resident of Oakland, NJ
With Kevin Heffernan

Hey Bob,

Here's a few little known facts about the railroad coming to Oakland in 1869. Little known except to you most likely.

Immediately prior to the Civil War, the governor of NJ was a man named Rodnam Price who is perhaps best known for his advocacy of New Jersey to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy after he left office. And, he officiated the opening of the RR in Oakland in 1869. Also, his son was the designer of the RR through Bergen County. Pierce ultimately moved to Oakland and died here in 1894. He is buried in the Reformed Cemetery in Mahwah.



Bob Spear

11:04 AM (7 hours ago)

to me

I heard of a man named Price as I recollect (faintly) but I did not know the Governor "connection" or the Railroad connection, thank you (more tidbits of history!)

I was able to print out the entire Henry Hopper interview and gave it to my sister to decipher the hand writing. She was amazed at all the details in it and is fascinated by it!

The Al Potash interview (132 pages!) I did not print out but she now has it on her laptop also to look at, many thanks!

My father never much cared for Al Potash- he always said "that new-comer who wants to run everything!" But I always got along well with Mayor Potash, he was one of the 6 people I had to have sign a recommendation for me to enlist in the Navy ! (You had to do that back then to enlist in a branch of Service) Some of the others were Chief Joe Woods, Arthur "Bud" Vervaet and possibly Frank Scardo/ I remember Mayor Potash's office at the time, He had this huge desk and it was covered with township maps and other papers!. I enlisted in October 1965 and left for basic training in January 1966 to Great Lakes Illinois. Many years later, I knew Jim Potash quite well, Al's son, his other son "Bob"? also the boys ran James Construction Company in town and among other things dug out the Island in the Ramapo River creating Potash Lake.

Jim was a large heavy-set guy, with features that reminded me a lot of my Grandfather in Pennsylvania. He was a "gentle-giant" of a guy and I was in the Oakland Rod & Gun Club with him and many others for years, We held our meetings in the top of the old Yawpaw Fire house. Bob Hopper (unknown if related to Henry Hopper?) was an area Real Estate broker and builder. He was an "educated man" so to speak and seemed to always "talk over everyone's head!".. But we got along well. He always called me "Bobby" He had his office in the Annie Meyers house on RVR. He lived in Deer Haven, in Mahwah and when I started my business he was my first lawn customer!.... He often would lament to me how "I wish I had worked more with my hands growing up so I could appreciate hard work more....!"... He was sort of a "dandy", and had never wanted for anything, but we got along well and I counted him as a good friend.

A good friend I came to know in a curious way was J. Nevins McBride of Franklin Lakes Urban Farms fame. Many people disliked McBride because he bought up land and was always building big expensive houses. I came to know Nevins as a friend however, even though I was far from "his station in life!" He would often arrive at my house in a cloud of dust in his big Red Cadillac convertible wearing his best patent leather shoes and expensive clothes. He would take off up through the woods at a moments notice and I would have to help him as he trotted through streams, mud, swamps, and woods looking at property! He would look at a piece of land and envision building on it!.. His Driver, Carmine was always chasing after him it seemed and trying to keep him out of trouble. Nevins was an accident looking to happen!.. It was a strange friendship, "The common man and the Millionaire!"... When I returned from the Navy , i went to work for him and Urban Farms and was there 8 years, A girl who worked in the office was a graduate Landscape Architect from Purdue University- She and I started Urban Farms Landscaping there and together we designed the new Paterson General Hospital grounds and many expensive homes in Franklin Lakes, Fairlawn, and other places. Lots of memories and I seem to be rambling on here!

I was sad when my old friend Nevins McBride passed away- I always cherished that friendship- being retired in Florida tends to do that I guess!
I learned some things myself in the Henry Hopper interview and many things I also remembered. I also remember Mr. Hopper. I delivered his Sunday newspaper to him ! And I remember him from Valley School also when I was just a kid--- (I'm soon to be 67 now!!!) My old friend Tony Fowler is also on Face book and we relate memories!.. Tony and I went to school together and hung out , rode bikes etc and things kids do!...

With all this old stuff here, I have "relighted" my interest in family history again!--- My sister is very involved with it and is always on her genealogy websites researching! Keep up the good (old-fashioned work!)

Part of the interview relates to the Henry Hopper farm at the top of Long Hill & Breakneck roads I remember well. The original road as Hopper relates went through the farm yard and along the back swampy land on a raised section that had a concrete culvert for the water to pass through to the Lily Pond, It continued eastward toward the Hughes property- thence up their later driveway where it became Franklin Lakes road headed towards Colonial road in Franklin Lakes. On a "bluff: overlooking Hoppers Crooked Pond was an old cemetery with many very old stones. I spent one entire summer cleaning it up for Mr. McBride. (Many people did not realize, Nevins McBride also appreciated history and cleaning up areas)

I found many old stones there, the earliest dating to 1707 and several Civil War era military markers. There's a new house built there now and I wonder if the owners realize they had built on top of an old burying ground? (scary Steven Spielberg stuff!) I had often contended that was the site of the original 1710 Church that was a log cabin. And it had been known as the "Church of the Pond" (Ponds Church) I have nothing to base that on except my own personal theory- why else would there had been such an old burying ground there? The earliest stone in Ponds Church cemetery dates from 1787. In history I have found, one must "read between the lines" of documented fact, interspersed with personal recollections and known history. and sometimes a more conclusive reasoning comes to why things were that way! Sometimes though it leads to even more confusion! I have yet to read the Potash interview.

The water from that area seeped in a westward direction from Franklin Lake. It passed between low hills and swampy land off Indian Trail Drive in Franklin Lakes, behind the old nursery ground of good friend Jack O'Leary, across Vreeland lane and westward through the Hughes property toward Hoppers farm. There is a low spot in the ground there allowing the water course to continue and drain to the Lily Pond (Hoppers Crooked Pond) There were more springs there that added to it and then it drained westward, again through a "swale' In the low hills behind the old Bill Rose property (where I eventually lived

for 14 years!) It then entered a large "oval basin"* surrounded by higher hills. This prehistoric drainage I believed was a "sink" to collect water from the surrounding land. There was no outlet, the water eventually seeped away into the soil and it was full of huckleberries there!. There may have been some sort of very ancient stream at one time that continued westward but was long since filled in by years of erosion and growth. I was always fascinated by land terrain and water courses..

The source of water for the "big Spring" as I called it, Hopper called it the McEvoy Spring because Clifford F. McEvoy owned the land at one time. It was by 1906 owned by Mrs. Remington Vernam, who also built the later-day Hansen House and Lilac Manor nursing home and a large house on Long Hill road. All this I have tried to document in my on going manuscript I still contribute to and hope to get to you some day!

Thanks again for all the great memories!

Bob Spear FFLAhistorian@gmail.com

*this "large oval basin" was later excavated by Oakland Industrial Park aka McBride Enterprises and became a collection point for storm water that was highly polluted by Exide Battery company and the other Industrial Park occupants through the drainage system. A long pipe line was laid from this "basin" westward down through the old sand pits and exited in the lower swamp behind what use to be the Hen's Roost (not far from your house on Grove Street!) It broke several times during heavy storms , resulting in repairs and damage to the neighboring woods (It's probably still there yet today?)

Kevin Heffernan <kheffernan555@gmail.com>
to Bob

12:44 PM (5 hours ago)

Hey Bob,

I never really knew Al Potash other than by reputation. When I first moved here in 1979, for some silly reason I wanted to trace the deeds of my property as far back as possible. My curiosity also extended to the 4 near-dead peach trees in my back yard. Peach trees? In Oakland? My property research revealed that your grandfather once owned my property and then you told me that he was very progressive in farming and experimentation. Bingo, the dots are connected!

The research about my property then combined with things in Oakland that, to a stranger, did not make sense. Things like the Ramapo Motel...why was it here? Or the RR tracks but no station. Or the Stream House. And so forth. That's when Al Potash's reputation and actions relative to the destruction of so many historic Oakland buildings became into focus.

He had a future vision for Oakland and it's historic treasures were in the way. For example, the Oakland Military Academy was 'coded' to death at his direction forcing it to move so that the Grand Union shopping center could be built. He then cut down the trees along RVR in the middle of the night for 'safety' reasons'. And, he wanted the Ponds Church to move in 1955 because it was interfering with the development of the Sears Shopping Center, then the Grand Union. And, did I mention that it was him that ordered the destruction of the RR station and that while it was being destroyed he remarked to a reporter that "maybe we might have made a mistake here"? Also, there was an 18th Century house where the Exxon gas station presently is on the corner of Powder Lane and RVR. Al secretly bought the property so that he could build the gas station. Although he did lead the charge for Oakland to purchase the Van Allen House, I honestly believe that he did so as an act of penance for prior historically destructive sins. I could go on and on. I guess the point is that I have little use or love for Big Al for what he did to Oakland. I think that he was the inspiration for my two books on Oakland....salvaging the history and sights of Oakland pre-Al Potash.

I'm not sure that Mrs. Remington Vernam built the either Lilac manor or the house that became the Hansen House. The Lilac manor was originally the Ramapo Sanatorium built in the late 1800s and that it was built around a large 18th Century stone house. My research says that she purchased it in 1910 - 1915. And, after the death of her son and sole heir, she continued to live in it until old age. She then decided to donate it to the Newark Archdiocese for use as a seminary. They declined due to the high cost of repair. Do you know when it was razed, how and by who to make way for the Shop Rite?

Your thoughts about the original location of the original Ponds Church make sense particularly since the pond behind the 1829 church is man made. Unfortunately, most of the original records were destroyed by a fire in the office of Samuel Demarest at the Demarest house in the 1920s. The charred beams are still there.

The new Oakland book idea seems to be moving forward. I'm trying to set up a lunch with Ed Siefert, Ron Romaine and Rich Walker to discuss the direction of the idea. They are willing. Needless to say, I'll keep you and Pete Emmons fully informed. I'm also going to try to 'recruit' Tony Fowler to be a contributor. Looking at it another way, there is almost 3 centuries of collective Oakland memory alone in this small group.

It's been great chatting with you. Let's continue this discussion!



Bob Spear

4:45 PM (1 hour ago)

to me

Back to you (excuse my large bold print---eyes aren't as young as they once were!)

I had little or no contact with Al Potash, except as I had previously mentioned going to his office and him putting his signature on my enlistment papers. I only know my father did not have flattering words for him!... His sons seemed to be ok but even they were "all business" oriented. Jim Potash it seemed always had a little smirk on his face if he talked to you- (as if a wolf would do, licking his chops!)

As a kid I only ventured as far as I could ride my bike but I can still recall the wind in my face pedalling down Oakland Avenue on my shiny red "English Racer" Oakland as it was, a great place to grow up, I had good upbringing- my dad was a hard worker who supported his family and we lived very humbly and unassuming in our little house off Long Hill road. I loved the woods around our home and spent my boyhood there like "Huck Finn"...I took an early interest in Historic stuff, and I was always amazed at Nature, big trees, plants, wildlife- the "bigger world" I only saw through our tiny black & white TV set or reading a newspaper.

When I went in the US Navy it was a life-changing event for me- I suddenly was thrust into the World as it really was. After recruit training at Great Lakes, Illinois I was assigned to the USS Independence, a giant aircraft carrier that at the time was in the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea! Talk about an introduction to adventure! That was front and center for a kid from Oakland NJ> While there our ship engaged Libyan Air Force Mirage fighters and shot down eight of them, (a fact that was never reported by newspapers!) played catch tag with Russian destroyers and once nearly cut a Russian light cruiser in half. We nearly went to war oddly enough with Israel itself when it was learned Israeli patrol boats had fired on a US ship The USS Liberty off Port Said Egypt, 47 US sailors were killed.

My dad passed away when I was on my Second 6th Fleet deployment and it took me a long time to fly home, it was a very sad time for me. I arrived back home just before Christmas and visited Ponds Cemetery to pay my respects..the air was still- it was a starry late afternoon I recall and the Church bells were ringing. I could not help but break down but strangely I did not feel embarrassed.

I had to report back to Norfolk, Virginia Naval Base and was in barracks there until my ship returned from deployment. It would be more than another year and a hasty cruise to Southeast Asia, and a 4 month NATO deployment to England and the North Sea, yet before I ended by enlistment and came home to Oakland. I had travelled many miles !

Our old Speer (Spear) property covered a number of parcels; the first was called "The Homestead Lot" containing about 160 acres + -
A 2nd was called "The Pasture and Woods lot" containing 55 acres including Henry I Speer's saw mill on the stream from the big Spring.
a 3rd was "A lot of hillside pasture lands about 65 acres" on the west side of Long Hill Road (above where the Shoprite was built) This tract was given to my Uncle; Jacob Speer, brother of my great great grandfather John H. Speer. He was said to raise goats and was a bee keeper. He later ran a General store in Saddle River. My great grandfather and my father's namesake; David H. Speer was a proficient agriculturalist of the day and his council was said to eagerly be sought by others.

He was a rather impressive looking gentleman, distinguished with white whiskers and always dressed impeccably it was said. John H. Speer had been his father. He built the large Victorian style home on RVR that later was turned into the Jewish Community Center (the name most people associated with it) A large barn out back had horse stables and room for hay storage. You can just barely make the house out in the famous Ponds Church 1878 sepia photo. Us kids would badger Dad around the supper table to "tell us a story!" and he never let us down.....I can still remember some of them today!

My mom would scold him at times for being too blunt with his language!....

I remember picking peaches at the old Valley Road house as David Sr had orchards also and no doubt those peach trees you mention were some of the remaining ones! David H. had two children; Andrew Irving and Anna Francis (our beloved Aunt Annie!) Her and D.C. Bush were married in 1900 and brother Andrew saw to it that she received David Sr's victorian house as a wedding gift. Andrews Spear married Lyda Elizabeth Bush from Crystal Lake NJ (my father's mother) She passed away in 1925 and my dad went to live with our Aunt Pearl in Crystal Lake. My dad and his father didn't get along well together and Aunt Pearl saw to it he got an education- sent him to Kansas City Kansas to a Mechanics School there. It was there he taught himself how to fly airplanes ! and helped fly the air route from Kansas City to Omaha, Nebraska and Witchita. He bought a World War One D4 "Jenny" and flew it for many years doing acrobatics out of the old Franklin Lakes Airport. My dad had joined the Oakland Fire Department very early and also the Police Department in town where he made Captain under Chief John Johnson in the turbulent 30's. Rough times! He remained on the Police force with Chief Lester Merrian whom I remember also. Charlie Meredith was the State Section Forest Fire warden then and the fire department fought many large mountain fires in the 1930's, one in which 15 firefighters were killed in Mahwah. tough times!

My dad worked at Wrights Aircraft Company before World War 2 and then as a Guard at Dupont DeNumoires explosives plant in Pompton Lakes. He

use to say he had been "too young for World War One (13) and too old for World War 2 (37)and by then had a family to support.

I only know what I recall from my father's stories about Mrs Remington Vernam- I knew she opened a water bottling company at the Big Spring and that my Grandfather Andrew had rented out the top floor of the saw mill to the Kanose Water Company later. I knew about the Martin family who lived in that area. The young Martin boys and my dad were great boyhood chums and he often recalled Mrs Martin's penchant for flowers and plants.

The younger Martin boy went back to France with his family prior to World War One and my dad got a few letters from him- he said " things were very grim in olde France- not like his fond memories of Oakland" The Spring was a place of fascination for me, it's super cold waters eased the muggy heat of mid summer, It was years later I discovered my GG grandfather & GGgrand Uncle raised trout there for market! in the 1870's.

The "Sanitorium" grounds was a place where towns folk would also gather for Sunday picnics and somewhere near there had been the 1740 stone house of worship of the Ponds consistory. I only recall my father as saying it had been Mrs Vernam's house at one time but I know little else of the details.

My mother and family moved to Oakland in 1920 from Marshall's Creek Pennsylvania. They came by horse drawn wagon with the furniture and a big old car she use to say. Oakland Avenue from Pompton to the Valley Church was being paved and the rest of the way to Mahwah was still a wagon road. Her father; George Featherman was a wood cutter who cleared land under contract and hauled timber to saw mills. (Rough work!) He was a rough old codger! but had a "pixie devilish twinkle" in his eye! He was bent over from a life of hard work I recall even when some of the family moved back to Pennsylvania. His father; also George Featherman Sr was a tall gentleman who was very kindly my mother said. Our great great grandmother lived a long life, (98) and use to stay with us from time to time. Her father had been "the soldier" Jeffrey Smith as he was known.

A veteran of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. He had been one of only 5 men in his calvary troop that survived the 3rd day's battle. He was later captured in Maryland and made a prisoner of War and sent to Belle Island in Richmond where he nearly died. (rough times!)

I sat down one day with my mom across the breakfast table and she launched into a colorful re telling of her early life in Pennsylvania and coming to Oakland and marrying Dad in 1936 in Analomink, Pennsylvania.

As can be seen I enjoy talking about old times!

Going back to Lilac Manor, sorry I don't have any details- it was long gone when I was a boy but I do recall a jumble of old foundation stones there in an overgrown pile? That had to be in the 1950's or early 1960's One of my mother's first homes they stayed in, coming to Oakland was Mrs. Pulis's house that was behind what later became the Hansen House. A man by the name of Burt Harrison lived there in my day and he was a lawn cutting customer.....got to go!--- time for dinner here---- more laterz!!!
