

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**WEST VILLAGE**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview  
**OTIS KIDWELL BURGER**

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

March 31, 2016

## Oral History Interview with Otis Kidwell Burger, March 31, 2016

Narrator(s)	Otis Kidwell Burger
Birthdate	11/9/1923
Birthplace	Staten Island, NY
Narrator Age	92
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	Bethune Street, New York, NY
Date of Interview	03/31/16
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Number of Sessions	1
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Otis Kidwell Burger at her home on Bethune Street, on March 31, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with Otis Kidwell Burger

The heat was on for half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening, and Jane Jacobs wrote her book upstairs. It was a rooming house. Twenty dollars, eight dollars or twenty dollars a week... She had a house around the corner, and a family, but she rented a room, eight dollars a week, to write her great book....So she came here for peace and quiet. I think she had teenagers. So, she would write the book, and because the heat was rarely on, she would go to bed, climb into bed to keep warm, and while she was thinking about the chapters. This was a great book... Then we later became good friends with Jane... and she was an activist, and we went down to a meeting south of here, about the lower Manhattan expressway that somebody wanted to put through. And it was a lot of opposition to that. I was sitting next to Jane, and this was going on, it was obviously, they were just pushing it through, pushing it through. I said to Jane, "There must be some way to stop this," and she leaped up, and went on the stage and tore the transcript out of the machine [laughs] and was instantly arrested. But somehow, it never came through. So that was so amazing! And brave of her.

(Burger p. 13-14)

"Well, the seamen were here, because my friend Ralph was a seaman, and when I met him he went back to sea a few times, and the waterfront was very bustling, and all the sailors knew each other and drank and carried on, and NMU [National Maritime Union] was built—that building with the portholes—over the protests of the membership, because it was expensive. And it was very lively! The seamen and the movers and many other people had a whole—I want to write a piece about this. David has left us some verbatim accounts. There were huge bars, all across. Everybody knew everybody else. Everybody would drift from bar to bar. And they got into fights [laughs]. At one point—I think it was a place called the Punjab, which was [laughs] known locally as the Punch-Jab, cause everybody was fighting all the time. One night the owner started cleaning all the tables out of the main room, and somebody said, "What are you doing?" He said, 'I'm giving more room for you guys to fight.' [laughs] So, they were a very lively crew."

(Burger p. 18)

"Oh, [the Village] felt like home! It felt like the place where we all belonged, and my great-grandfather had been here. My other great-grandfather, I think he roomed here and went home on the weekends, back to Staten Island. So we've been around, I think. I sold all my wares at lots of little shops around. I knew other people who did the same sort of thing. It was a very different mix.

You met that young man in the hall? That's a whole different world. They are supported by some financial group that's paid an exorbitant rent for the top floor and sent him and his girlfriend over here to do financial things. It's not art anymore. And on a much different scale, financially."

(Burger p. 20)

"When I was maybe nine or ten, I remember driving with my father along the West Side, and a cow had escaped from the slaughterhouse. She's galloping and slipping all over the railroad tracks, pursued by two of the men from the slaughterhouse. I thought, "Poor thing." God! I am fairly vegetarian [laughs], but—so where were—yes, and there was Western Beef up

there. There were more butchers all over this place. There were butchers! And in fact down on Bleecker Street I'm told there was a place where you could pick out your chicken or your rabbit and have it killed and butchered on the spot\*. And you could get meat, but now it comes wrapped. You're spared all that blood and gore, but there was certainly a lot of blood and gore up in the meat market district. And during the daytime it wasn't so noticeable, but five or six in the morning, they were out there. And it has become unbearably genteel, with fancy clothing. Where do all the people come that wear the fancy clothing in New York? These days?" (Burger p. 23)

"It was still the telephone company\*\*. And the train that went screeching through Westbeth, it's now become the Highline. And of course there were ships. You could always hear them coming and going. It was pretty noisy out here. On New Year's, all the ships would let loose, and celebrate. Sometimes you could watch the Queen Mary, with an escort of tugs moving out. It was great. And of course we had the ferries. You could ride the ferry, and that was an ocean voyage, and it used to take a lot longer. It used to be quite an experience, to be on the ferry."

(Burger p. 23)

"It's changed so enormously. It was a great mix of interesting people and things and coffee houses and jazz and Chumley's and a whole lot of things that have gone. It's become the billionaires chasing out the millionaires. It's become much more bland. [sighs] Thank god there are still some interesting people around. I'm glad I have this house, but it seems that the whole world has changed outside, and I'm sure that every elderly person of every age has been saying that. So, but, no, I'm afraid of what will happen.

Realtors keep asking me to sell the house to them. I know what would happen. It would be changed back into a single family house for a billionaire. Jane Jacobs helped save this neighborhood once from Zeckendorf. I'm not about to do it. So, does that answer any questions?"

(Burger p. 29)

\*The market district and Bleecker has lost most of the small stores and now sells high priced designer clothing.

\*\* Westbeth was once the telephone building, with hordes of people coming and going every day.

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Otis Kidwell Burger

Otis Kidwell Burger was born on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1923, and lived in the house of her grandmother, Mrs. William G. Wilcox. Otis' mother started a school in the house of her great grandmother, Elizabeth Neall Gay next door. A seasoned protester, Otis comes from a long line of activists that she learned about as a child. Her great-grandfather was Sydney Howard Gay, a New Yorker who became a fierce abolitionist after taking a trip to the American South and seeing first-hand the horrors of slavery. (He had until that time been pro-slavery like many northerners whose economy depended on slave produced sugar, rum, and cottons for the mills in New England.) After that experience, Gay edited *The Anti-Slavery Standard* for fourteen years. Otis' grandmother, Mary Otis Gay Willcox, was also a well-known activist and public orator in her time, who dedicated much of her activity to the suffragette movement.

When Otis was a teenager, her parents moved the family to Short Hills, New Jersey. She remembers her first encounter with Greenwich Village during this time, when she corralled two of her high school classmates to journey into New York City with her on New Year's Eve. "It was a real disappointment," she recalls, "cause we were too young to go to the bars." Later, in 1942, Otis' mother rented an enormous apartment at 16 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street, an enormous garden duplex for \$250 a month and sublet for \$250 the rear half, living room, fireplace, and bedroom terrace, hot plate, and private entrance, which Otis remembers quite fondly for its grand piano and its immense fireplace, among other things. That building has now been replaced by an underground garage and small apartment.

Otis attended Cornell University and married a classmate immediately following the end of World War II: Knox Breckenridge Burger. Otis and Knox first lived in a furnished apartment on West 73<sup>rd</sup> Street. It was a very dark apartment. She recalls Knox getting a job as fiction editor of the magazine *Collier's*, just as the couple was down to its last 200 dollars. That stroke of luck allowed Otis and Knox to move into a five-flight walk-up on Barrow Street. At the time, Otis was working mainly in ceramics. At the time, the crafts-making scene in the Village was bustling. "I didn't make a lot of money," she remembers, "but I kept very busy." She also acted in productions at Judson Church and St. Luke's School.

Otis became pregnant for the first time in 1948. During that time, she heard (by way of her husband) that the publishing house Simon & Schuster was looking to publish a book written by a woman about the experience of pregnancy. "This inspired me, so I sat down and wrote it," she recalls. "Simon & Schuster never did publish it, but Doubleday did. And for a glorious week, my book was in the windows on Fifth Avenue...Apparently nobody had thought of writing a book about being pregnant!"

By the time her first child was born, Otis and Knox had moved again, this time into a ground-level house on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street. Just before the birth of their second child, they moved to another apartment on West 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Soon enough, however, they moved back to the West Village ("thank god," says Otis), to 395 Bleecker Street, known as Bleecker Gardens. The house had a large communal courtyard where Otis and Knox would throw parties that were frequented by a number of figures in their literary circles. Most famous among these was Norman Mailer,

whose sister lived upstairs—he “always came late,” according to Otis. Both of her children attended the nearby St. Luke’s School.

In 1959, Otis and her family moved into the house where she currently resides, at 27 Bethune Street. It was originally a rooming house. Otis recalls Jane Jacobs renting a room for eight dollars a week, while she wrote her famous treatise on American urban planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Otis also recalls that during the 1960s, she was adopted by a gang of neighborhood kids who were using the top floor room as a clubhouse.

Otis reflects on some of the major changes she has seen in the Village since moving into 27 Bethune. Among these are the dramatic increase in property values, the drop in crime, and the increasing rarity of “characters wandering around” the neighborhood. Otis notes that people in the Village tend to be much more polite with one another—an ethos that she terms “company manners,” to go along with the increased presence of people living in the neighborhood that work in the financial sector. She recalls the influence of sailors, homosexuals, and squatters living in shacks along the piers on the neighborhood. She ends by noting that her weekly poetry gathering remains the last vestige of the Village as she has known it.

#### General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP West Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing South Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.



## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Zapol:** This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It's March 31, 2016. This is Liza Zapol, I'm at 27 Bethune Street, and if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Burger:** I'm Otis Kidwell Burger, of 27 Bethune Street. I was born on Staten Island, New York, on November 9, 1923. I was born into my grandmother's house, because grandfather had died recently, and so my mother and father and I came to keep her company.

Now, her house was right next to my great-grandparents' house. When my grandfather proposed to my grandmother, she said—This is a poem I wrote: “I'm opposed to wearing a big diamond ring. For my hands are too plain for such a thing, and ostentation is my dread, so he built her a big house instead. They had [laughs] five kids, kittens, puppies, ponies, turtles, goldfish, guppies, boats, books, baseballs, and bikes, beach vacations, mountain hikes. Her best friends weren't flashy rocks, but family, house, and blue chip stocks.” Anyway.

So the house he built was right across a gravel driveway from my great-grandparents' house. It was a square, dark, mansard-roofed house. Great-grandparents' house was tall, white. A U-shaped driveway ran between them, around, down to the stables, a bowling alley, a gymnasium, and back up past the rear of the house, sunken gardens, gardens everywhere, trees everywhere. It was absolute heaven. I always thought I would come to live there when I grew up, but my grandmother died when I was ten, and everything folded.

I have a book that my aunt, Anita Parkhurst, put together, about my great-grandfather, William Henry Wilcox, who lived here in New York, born on Cedar Street in 1822. And then Sydney Howard Gay, who was born in the family house up in Hingham, Mass. He had a very interesting past, because like many people he was all for slavery, because it produced all kinds of good things like sugar and rum and cotton. On a trip down South, something happened and he came back and he became a violent abolitionist, and a newspaper editor of the *Anti-Slavery Standard* for some fourteen years, which was also a station on the Underground Railroad.

So, we children—I lived there, in my grandmother's house for I think three or four years. And then my mother started a school in my grandparents' house, so of course we heard an awful

lot about Sydney Howard Gay, and what an admirable bunch of people they were, going out, trying to free slaves\*. And I think they were—My mother sold Grandfather Gay's papers to Butler Library at Columbia University about, over fifty years ago, and two people have written books about this. And one of them, Don Papson, I got to know, and he presented his book at the Left Bank bookstore, and then again at the Jefferson Market Library. Don started an Underground Railroad Museum some years ago, with his wife. And he is really a terrier at finding out things. He digs into old archives, he gets all kinds of fascinating histories.

**Zapol:** What were some of the stories that you heard about your great-grandfather? Were those a part of the subjects of the school that your mother taught? Was that taught as a part of the school, or was this more in the house? [00:05:09]

**Burger:** No, no, it just sort of—it was around. We all knew about great-grandfather. School was teaching reading and writing, and I remember learning to read there. But the whole—it was there. It was kind of a history. It was a part of our lives.

And the stories, well, let's see. Actually he was never attacked as far as I know, physically—although one newspaper editor, Elijah Lovejoy, was shot and killed by a mob, he foolishly came out to confront them with a pistol. But grandfather was—actually, he was kind of a frail man who often had ill health and so forth, but he was brave. One story that I heard was that he was out on a lecture tour, on horseback, of course, and he came to this house. He was put up there and in the middle of the night the owners came and said, "You must leave, there's a mob at the gate." He did get out on horseback down a back lane.

But another time he came down, mud-spattered and tired, and the door of his host family opened and there was this beautiful young woman, Elizabeth Neal, (who was the daughter of several abolitionist Quakers). He fell in love instantly, and eventually they did get married, over family objections, because he was not a Quaker in spite of the fact that he was an abolitionist.\*\*

And so they had this place on Staten Island, but they lived briefly in New York. Don looked it up. I think it's the place where the New School is today.

**Zapol:** It was on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, I believe, but I'm not sure. Or at least one of his residences was on 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Burger:** 12<sup>th</sup> Street, right, but then they moved to Staten Island, which was right near the Sailors' Snug Harbor. I was told that there had been a bigger piece of property with orchards and all that, but by the time I knew it, it had shrunk up a little bit.

And I was told that my grandmother, daughter of Sydney Howard Gay and Elizabeth Neall, who's named Mary Otis, was an organizer even at a very young age, and organized the neighborhood children in their games, and who got the first drinks at the well [laughs]. So she went on to become Chair of the local Suffrage movement, she said she would go out in an open touring car and stop in the marketplace, and she would get up and speak to a bunch of small children, a few dogs, and the neighborhood drunk, until a crowd gathered and then the main speaker would speak. She was very well known. My great-grandfather was the treasurer and the financial advisor of Tuskegee Institute. Together they would go down there by train, and they would keep the window shade pulled because they were afraid of being shot at. Those things were very tense, even—well, of course, they're still fairly tense.

But what else—oh, they were both on the boards of trustees for all kinds of institutions: Staten Island Academy, the Museum of Natural History, and so on and so on. It was very impressive to ride downtown with my grandmother, because she had a Pierce-Arrow, a chauffeur, a window in between them, a little thing to put fresh flowers in. She was impressive. But she, some years before that, she said she would never get up in one of those things. And then her uncle left her a car, and so the coachman, brother Christopher, had to learn how to use cars.

Anyway, that was a long, that's not [laughs] really Village history that you want to know about, but they were so impressive, those two.

**Zapol:** It sounds like it was quite a playground for you growing up. What happened when you were ten? [00:09:58]

**Burger:** Oh, well, let's see. She, my grandmother, had a place down on Avon, near Asbury Park, and we went summers there. Then we started, the family started going up to the Adirondacks, and she came up to visit one summer in [19]33. She looked tired. I thought all was not well. I can't imagine why an elderly seventy-year-old woman was traveling alone up to Essex, New York. Anyway, she went home back to Avon and had a heart attack and died. Everything went! The houses were sold. That glorious place in Staten Island was torn down and replaced by little

brick houses. The last time I went down to Avon was many years ago, but the house had been turned into a hotel.

Anyway, this is not New York [laughs] but my family, my mother built a house on the top of Staten Island, next to her brother Henry Wilcox and his wife Anita Parkhurst, who was an illustrator of *Saturday Evening Post* covers and *Collier's* covers. They had a very nice house there, and we had a very nice house, and we overlooked the Bay, and we made occasional trips into New York, and New York was the magical place. You could take a car onto the ferry in those days, and drive around.

And eventually, we moved from there to Short Hills, New Jersey, where there was a wonderful school, Buxton Country Day School. I remember that New York was always the attraction. I once, in high school, I decided that we really ought to go to Greenwich Village on New Year's Eve, so two other kids and I headed out. It was a real disappointment, cause we were too young to go to the bars.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE 'Burger\_OtisKidwellGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3';

BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE

'Burger\_OtisKidwellGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3']

**Zapol:** So we're continuing, you were saying that you had relocated to Short Hills, New Jersey, right?

**Burger:** Right, right.

**Zapol:** And then—

**Burger:** Wonderful school.

**Zapol:** And then what, what then were your ongoing connections to the Village? You said you came to the Village when you were a teenager, is that right?

**Burger:** One New Year's, a couple of other high school kids and I thought it would nice to come to the Village on New Year's, but it was very disappointing. It was very quiet, and of course we were too young to go into bars, so that was a disappointment.

But then, later on, my mother rented an apartment house in 16 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street, which used to be Randall Place, where my other great-great-grandfather, William Henry Wilcox, also lived. It was a wonderful place, which I have to describe, enviously [laughs]: An enormous duplex, and she sublet the entire back half as a one bedroom, living room, porch, bathroom, hot plate, private entrance. 250 dollars a month. That was exactly what she paid for the whole thing. And [laughs] it was a gorgeous apartment! She had a grand piano there, and there was an immense fireplace with a huge gilt mirror over it, upstairs. Downstairs, an immense—they still had the original old cooking fireplace and when my children came to visit, my mother did something really weird, she took all these old milk cartons and made little houses out of them and put them in the fireplace and set fire to them, and had a whole town going up in smoke [laughs]. So, oh, dear me!

Anyway, she—

**Zapol:** So when was that? You said that much later she ended up there—

**Burger:** That was 1942, I think, when we moved in there—but, let's see, I got married out of college, out of Cornell, and married another Cornelian, Knox Breckenridge Burger, and we had no money, no jobs [laughs] I don't know what the hell we thought we were doing. Anyway, this was right after the war. He had been on Saipan covering the fire raids over Tokyo with *Yank* [the Army Weekly], and so we sat around and tried—I sold a few things. We were down to our last 200 dollars when he got the job as fiction editor of *Collier's*. [Zapol coughs]

**Zapol:** Excuse me.

**Burger:** He was twenty-six, and the guy that had been the editor was Ken Littauer, who had been with the *Lafayette Escadrille*. And there were a lot of interesting people that worked there. I meant to ask Beth to look up on her smartphone some of them. We knew John McNulty and Faith McNulty, and Kurt Vonnegut was an old friend from Cornell and Knox printed some of his

stuff. And there were a lot of new writers, some of which have kind of disappeared by now, although Kurt was pretty big for a long time.

**Zapol:** And *Collier's* was just up the street from here, is that right? They were the print, publishing house?

**Burger:** No, no, *Collier's* was uptown.

**Zapol:** I see.

**Burger:** I forget exactly where it was, but a lot of the people were down, came down here, and we had parties, and all that. It was a whole Village culture.

**Zapol:** So how did you—actually, just for the record, I don't think you said when you were born, the year you were born.

**Burger:** Oh! November 9, 1923.

**Zapol:** Thank you. And so, when did you find, or where were you living when you first arrived in New York with your husband, and how did you find your way to the Village?

**Burger:** Oh! Well we married right after the war was over. We were in a furnished basement on West 73<sup>rd</sup>, which was awful. Then finally, after he got a job, we moved down to Barrow Street. We were on a five-flight walk-up, with an immense quantity of roaches. But it was a two-room apartment with one tiny bedroom, and in those days, the way to get an apartment was to buy the furniture of the previous resident, which, the furniture was awful and there was a lot of it [laughs]. And, but, you know, Knox was working, I was working. I was in the outdoor art show and other places—[00:05:34]

**Zapol:** What were you doing? You were—

**Burger:** Oh, I made little sculptures. That's one of them, a big sculpture of mine.

**Zapol:** Mm. So what was your medium at that time?

**Burger:** I was in ceramics. I bought a kiln from a man on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, Tom De Lime. There were craft stores all over the place, in those days. You could get clay at various places, but they've all

gone. And Sybil Cooper and Jack Wolf and Ceramic Supply of New York and New Jersey, and a LaGuardia place, went back to New Jersey. There were a lot of people doing crafts in those days. And I didn't make a lot of money [laughs] but I kept very busy. And, what else—

**Zapol:** And you had studied as an artist at Cornell, or was—

**Burger:** I had studied at Bennington. I did sculpture at Cornell and at the Art Students League. I studied as a zoologist [laughs] at NYU one term and at Cornell. I never went into that, but I went into making sculptures of animals.

So I did a lot, and I also, let's see—I sang with the Oratorio Society, with my brother. And I acted at Judson Church. I don't know if they still have that. They had Happenings back in the [19]60s, and they—you know Happenings?

**Zapol:** Tell me more! [Burger laughs]

**Burger:** And they had a play put on by Joel Oppenheimer called *Great American Desert*; I played a madam. That was a lot of fun! I was also the prop manager. I had to find some long johns for the men to wear. You have no idea how hard it was to find long johns. And so, anyway, the play was published and so I have a copy of it.

And what else. Oh, well, St. Luke's School, my kids got in there, thank god.

**Zapol:** When did you have children, and were you still living at Barrow Street at the time?

**Burger:** No, thank god, my husband found [laughs]—that was a five-flight walk-up! He found a ground-level house on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street, which is still there. It was a darling little house. With a tiny upstairs, and a tiny yard. And, let's see.

We borrowed a car from Bob Schwartz. He and his wife Lenny had started the Motel on the Mountain, out of town. They were good friends. I think he knew Schwartz when he was with Yank. And last I heard Bob was dying. That was a couple of years ago. Anyway, so we borrow Bob's car, and my water's broke, and I didn't want to go to the hospital, so we sat around playing poker with our friends Ann and Walter McQuade who lived in the Village, nearby, and [laughs] suddenly I decided it was time to go. We go to the car, and went up the West Side

Highway. Knox missed the 125<sup>th</sup> exit. We backed down the highway [laughs], made it to the hospital. So, that was pretty exciting.

**Zapol:** I think you wrote about that in your book, as well. Under the pseudonym Abigail Lewis.

**Burger:** Oh, you've read the book. [00:09:58]

**Zapol:** I read an excerpt of it, and I'm very interested. I'm interested about that book, about what drove you to write that book, but also about your pseudonym.

**Burger:** Oh. [laughs] Well, let's see.

What drove me to write it was I was totally unaware—I knew nothing about babies, and I was a little scared, and Knox had a friend, Larry Cunningham, who was an agent. Larry said that the idea, I think, Simon & Schuster had put out this idea for a book by a pregnant woman to several women and one male doctor. This inspired me, so I sat down and wrote it, and Simon & Schuster never did publish it, but Doubleday did. And for a glorious week, my book was in the windows on Fifth Avenue.

And it got excerpted here and there. It got excerpted in *Red Book*, it got reprinted in Britain, it got a couple of excerpts later. Apparently nobody had thought of writing a book about being pregnant! But I think somebody has now. So it's not all, not unique anymore.

**Zapol:** Well, what I find interesting or unique is now, from reading about, I guess, a time—this was 1948, where you were pregnant?

**Burger:** No, let's see—

**Zapol:** [194]9?

**Burger:** Yeah, [19]48. She was born in [19]49—yeah, ok.

**Zapol:** Just hearing a lens—hearing you write about that particular time, and maybe even feeling ambivalence about having a child—

**Burger:** Oh my god! [laughs] We just got through with World War II, and we both had plans to do other things. I certainly had plans to do other things, but this was not something that women



did very often in those days. I don't know. I just—I made do with what I could do at home, to take care of the children, so I wrote and I made sculptures and so forth. I did not get a nine-to-five job, although I worked for Franklin Simon one Christmas. A nine-to-five has never been my time anyway, so—but yeah, there was all kinds of women's lib going on, Gloria Steinem and so forth. And—

**Zapol:** That happened a little later.

**Burger:** It was a little later, when I had two children by then.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. Were you involved in that? I know you said your grandmother was involved as a suffragette—

**Burger:** Yeah, but no, I don't think I was involved in that. I've been in many protests: anti-Vietnam, anti-Westway, anti-the closing of St. Vincent's, and so forth. But no, I knew people who were fighting for it, but I just went ahead and did what I was doing. [laughs]

**Zapol:** So at that point you said you had moved to 13<sup>th</sup> Street, that's right, where you were?

**Burger:** Yeah, moved to 13<sup>th</sup> Street, and this baby was born [laughs] and it was quite a shock to both of us. Knox was a single child, he was not used to babies. And we had a diaper service. And next door was the NMU [National Maritime Union] cooking school, and then a little courtyard outside. So we had this diaper program, and one morning we didn't have a clean, dry diaper. I was drying one over a torch lamp, the baby's screaming her head off, this torch lamp [laughs] and diaper begins to smoke. The smoke drifts out of the window into the courtyard, and suddenly somebody down across the courtyard starts shouting, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" [laughs]. And Knox leaned out the window, and he said, "It's all right, madam, we are just offering up a small sacrifice." [laughs]

So, then we moved to a huge apartment on West 15<sup>th</sup>, across from Stuyvesant Park. For our second daughter. And then, thank god, back to the Village. [00:15:03]

Now, it's all in my article: My uncle Henry, mother's older brother, they had been on the top of Staten Island, beside us, but they had moved to New York. There was a bunch of boarded-up houses all along Bleecker Street and around the corners. He was a builder, and she was a

designer, so they renovated the houses, they added a couple of stories to—what’s the number, on West 11<sup>th</sup>?—to their building, and it was very interesting: You get in the front door and you go in a closed stairway, up in the darkness, and you come out of the top floor, the added top floors, and there were rooms and kitchens and all that on her studio, on the very top. It was magical. I don’t know who’s there now. They of course are long gone. But the courtyard, we had lots of interesting people. Alice Wolf, who worked for the Kirkus service, the library service; I often did reviews from them. And that’s gone. And, oh god, what’s their name, next door—Charlie van Doren got involved in a, cheating on a TV show, oh god—

**Zapol:** The quiz shows?

**Burger:** Yeah.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh.

**Burger:** I can’t remember his name—Van Doren. The Van Dorens. And other interesting people, including Lucille Patterson Marsh, who was a great friend of my aunt Anita, and did portraits of babies, and she did the annual picture for the annual “The 100 Neediest Cases” in *New York Times*, which I think is long gone. So, we had a very interesting group. And we had big parties out in the communal garden. And Norman Mailer’s sister lived upstairs [laughs], so we saw Norman from time to time.

Anyway, and then we got involved in the school, because the children were grown, and thank god we got into St Luke’s.

**Zapol:** Can you tell me a story about a particular party you had in the courtyard that comes to mind?

**Burger:** Not really, but I can remember having first moved in there, and the children were out playing, and Neall came rushing in and she said, “Katherine has fallen down the deep, dark hole!” And I said, “What!” She’d fallen down the stairway, but she was ok.

No, I don’t remember much about the parties, but they were all Cornell [sighs]—who was there? All the staff of *Collier’s*, and John Brooks, and his wife, and Steve Becker, who was a novelist, who had something called Landry’s ascending syndrome, in which you become totally

paralyzed, and then he was in an iron lung and he came out, and I met them later on, down in the Caribbean, when he had established himself. No, I don't remember anything specific about the parties. They were full of interesting people. Norman Mailer always came late. And with Joan Aucort, who was beautiful, married five times, alcoholic, fell down, broke her skull, fell down, broke her leg, wound up in an institution with wet brain. So there was a tremendous variety of people. Oh, and a friend Mike Detzer, whose father was an editor of the *Reader's Digest*, and lived in Michigan, but Mike was always flying around. He was hyperactive, and he would come to the house [laughs] and the cat would immediately go out the back door, which she wasn't supposed to do, and Mike would go after him. [Zapol laughs] And Mike was also a volunteer fireman, so if a fire department truck came through the neighborhood, Mike would be out trying to join it. [00:19:59]

So, and then, there was a basement room, and Knox rented that and put a television in. I didn't really want a television, but it was a whole new thing. We didn't have television. So the children were always down in the basement, watching the television. And from time to time one of them would pop up saying, "Oh! It's too scary down there," and I would say, "Oh, well stay up here," and they would say, "Oh, no!" Back they would go. [laughs]

And we got involved in the school, and I taught a clay class. We went into plays, put on plays. The children were in plays. I was in a play.

**Zapol:** What were some of those plays that you were involved in?

**Burger:** Play was "The Long Christmas Dinner," Thornton Wilder. A very interesting play, which is a whole, just a long Christmas dinner, and the characters come and go. And then there was one which I can't remember the name of. Where there's a ghost—it was made into a movie.

**Zapol:** Another Thornton Wilder?

**Burger:** No, no. Possibly Noel Coward, but I'm not sure.

**Zapol:** "Blithe Spirit"?

**Burger:** "Blithe Spirit," right! Yes, ok, "Blithe Spirit." I was a set manager. I had to figure out how to make things fly around the room! [laughs] It was a lot of fun. I don't know if they're

doing that anymore, I've kind of lost track with the schools since my children graduated. But in the early days, there were nuns, and I was kind of horrified. I'm not into all that, and I came in one day and the nuns were telling the children how the crown of thorns was pressed down on the head of Jesus, and I said, "You know, do children really need to know this sort of stuff?" But they faded away. There were nuns at St. Vincent's, also. And they were, but they were very good, cause one day, Cambell Boyce was a good friend, a little boy. And one day he and Katherine were having an argument at the sand pit. She threw sand at him, and his eyes were just full of sand. So the school called me. I don't know where his mother was at that point. I took both children over to St. Vincent's, and the nuns were wonderful! They washed his eye out, and they bandaged it, and they said, "Now, you can pretend for a while what it is like to be blind! And what a wonderful experience!" [laughs]

A couple of months ago, Katherine was at a reunion at the school, and she brought in these two enormous men, one of whom was Cambell and he said, "Oh, my little mother! My little alternate mother!" Oh, shoot. Anyway, so yes, we had, I had a lot of interesting times at St. Vincent's.

**Zapol:** So this was also, the school, and you were talking about religion—did you grow up with Quaker influence, or what was your—

**Burger:** Well, I grew up thinking that the Quakers were very nice people, but we did not go to meeting or church, and at one point my mother said, "Perhaps you should be going to Sunday school." [laughs] And there was a universal "no." So, no, I never had any religious things. I don't think I've ever completely read the Bible, and I think it's a rather strange religion. But the Quakers, whatever their religious beliefs were, their social beliefs were wonderful, and—[to cat] is that you Nessie? [To Zapol] She never comes out for strangers. But there was a mouse under the sofa, and she got it.

So, no, no, Knox was the one that was interested in getting them into sort of a religious thing, because we could have gone to Little Red Schoolhouse. But we got this house, and it was right next to the school, and the people were really nice, and we had good friends.

**Zapol:** When did you move to this house?

**Burger:** 1959.

**Zapol:** And what influenced that move?

**Burger:** Aha. Well we were in this wonderful place on Bleecker Gardens, which belonged to my aunt Anita. And my cousin Sally is two weeks younger than I am, and Anita was giving property away to the children, and she gave the house to Sally, and Sally gave us a year to move. And we looked, and we looked, and one day I answered an ad for a four-room apartment on Sheridan Square. [00:25:18]

My husband was in the hospital. He had a bad hip, he was having a hip operation, and it was one room that had been subdivided [laughs] like this, and I walked to the nearest real estate person and I said, “I want to buy a house.” Anne Lye, whose husband was Len Lye, who made interesting movies, lived right down here, and had owned this house, and so had my cousin Warner, and it was at that point owned by two retired policemen. The heat was on for half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening, and Jane Jacobs wrote her book upstairs. It was a rooming house. Twenty dollars, eight dollars or twenty dollars a week.

Anyway, so—I don’t know if you really want to hear this.

**Zapol:** I do.

**Burger:** So, Anne took us around. I couldn’t even see the inside, cause a pair of homosexuals were living here that had the whole thing blocked off and this strange, colored orangey paint on the walls, and you couldn’t get in here, so I said, without seeing this, “I’ll take it.” And twenty-four hours later, Anne called me and said there was some other woman who wanted to take it, and she would give me 1,000 dollars if I’d give up, but I said, “No, don’t be silly.” So then my husband got out of the hospital, and we scrambled [phone rings]—oh, excuse me.

**Zapol:** Ok.

**Burger:** Anyway, so we moved in here. The place was a mess. It was a rooming house upstairs, and we got—many of those people simply vanished, although there was a guy living in the peak, in the little room on the top, boiling in the summer, freezing in the winter, and we found him a place with a terrace, and he moved in. And the day he moved, he was taking stuff down from the

top floor and he was gradually sort of leaving stuff behind [laughs], and shedding himself all the way down, and he had a lot of neckties, and I hung the neckties along on the street, on the fence, for the homeless people to pick up, like—

Anyway, so that was a good outcome. And I think some other people landed happily.

**Zapol:** And you said, when you moved, Jane Jacobs was living here, or she had lived here before?

**Burger:** No, no, she had a house around the corner, and a family, but she rented a room, eight dollars a week, to write her great book, the—

**Zapol:** Right, cause she lived on Hudson, so—

**Burger:** Right. So she came here for peace and quiet. I think she had teenagers. So, she would write the book, and because the heat was rarely on, she would go to bed, climb into bed to keep warm, and while she was thinking about the chapters. This was a great book. Anyway, I think some of this is in the—I didn't put that in. Then we later became good friends with Jane, as I—she is a distant relative of this chap who wrote this book that's sitting over there. So, we knew him, and we knew her, and she was an activist, and we went down to a meeting south of here, about the lower Manhattan expressway that somebody wanted to put through. And it was a lot of opposition to that. I was sitting next to Jane, and this was going on, it was obviously, they were just pushing it through, pushing it through. I said to Jane, "There must be some way to stop this," and she leaped up, and went on the stage and tore the transcript out of the machine [laughs] and was instantly arrested. But somehow, it never came through. So that was so amazing! And brave of her. It would never occur to me [laughs], but—[00:30:13]

**Zapol:** The Westway, you were saying the Westway never came through.

**Burger:** The west, no, it was the lower Manhattan expressway.

**Zapol:** Right.

**Burger:** Westway, we certainly all objected to. I've been to many meetings about that. Including on the 40<sup>th</sup> floor of the Twin Towers, which was really scary, so I think of those people

jumping out of there. Even for forty stories, it was terrifying. How could you—well, you had to do it.

Anyway, where was I? Back to the house!

**Zapol:** Yes, you were talking about Jane living here and when you moved in.

**Burger:** Yeah. And she moved out. Oh, she moved I think before that, because she got the book published.

**Zapol:** Or, sorry, she rented a room here, of course, she didn't live here.

**Burger:** She rented a room here. And there was, I say, in my piece for the *Villager*, there was a magician here, all kinds of weird people. And they all moved, but one morning I was throwing some stuff out and some kids came by, with a dog, and they said, "Say, lady, is this your house?" I said, "Yes." "Say, lady, can we have a clubhouse here?" And I: "I would have to ask my husband!" They were past me like a shot, and upstairs. They lived up there, they had the dog, moved up there, they had a Victrola with one record on. It was something about "goody, goody, he'll knock you down." Anyway, it was a horrid record. This went on for some time.

And then Harold Edelman, who was a Cornell friend, architect of the Village, came and looked this place over. He had already advised us to buy it, that it was possible to make it into a house. So everything that was upstairs was stripped out, all the walls, everything was changed. And the kids had to go, [laughs] but they did break in here a few times. It was hard to get rid of them. They knew how to get into everything. I came back one day: I heard strange noises in the basement, and I opened the basement door, there they were! They'd gotten in through this hatchway.

**Zapol:** And can you describe these children to me?

**Burger:** These children? Ah, one of them became fairly famous. He belonged to the Hadley family.

**Zapol:** When you're touching the microphone, I can hear that, it's picking up.

**Burger:** Oh, sorry.

**Zapol:** Yup. No problem.

**Burger:** Jackie was one of the Hadley family, who was notorious in the neighborhood for being fairly violent. He was a homosexual, and quite restrained, and his best buddy was Johnny. Whose mother or sister was a prostitute, I forget which. They lived down around Luke's, and he was really kind of a sweet kid. And forlorn.

Anyway, Jackie went on to—when there was a recycling center over here, they tore down the St. [WORD UNCLEAR—00:33:42]. For a while he was a recycling—he helped in the recycle—he knew people. He turned into a pretty good guy. And he died, probably AIDS. I have no idea what happened to Johnny, but somebody's been ringing my doorbell at weird hours of the morning for the last twenty years. [laughs] I've sometimes wondered if this was Johnny coming back. But they gave us the dog. It was a wonderful dog. We had a lovely life with that dog.

Anyway, so we were living here in all this chaos, plaster dust and so forth, and one day we had a tremendous rainstorm. I didn't realize there was a drain in the backyard, which was clogged up. The studio started to fill up with water. My husband rushed upstairs and got an old mattress out of the rooming house and threw it down. Soaked up the water, but boy, that was hard to get rid of later! So we were camping out for quite a while. [00:34:55]

Meanwhile, Anne Lye told me that the house across—oh, god, the houses across the street. There were three old ladies that lived in a house across the street. One of them was demented, and lived on the top floor. I think she—yeah, she died. And the other two sold the house for four hundred thousand dollars immediately, and moved. I went in there, and looked around. The place was in absolute shambles. The roof was leaking, and the demented lady on the top floor had spy glasses, which, she was obviously watching the street [laughs] and then across the way it was a woman and her son who lived in one of these houses. I'm not sure of the time sequence in all this. Anyway, she died, and the son tried to marry the woman he'd been going with, and she refused to come into that house for some reason. So he moved out with her and left the dog in here. And the place was kind of a mess. People fed it through the slot. Well, this was a trifle later—because before that, Anne called me and said there was a woman who wanted to buy—was it that house? I can't remember. A house across the street. But the woman who was



selling wanted 30,000 in cash. So, Dean—what the hell is his last name?—Dean hesitated, and his wife, who had been the one that wanted to buy this house, was an architect. She had no children. She wanted a house to work on! And he refused to—or delayed—on paying 30,000 dollars in cash, and she killed herself just before Christmas. So for a long time—he bought it anyway! He would sit across the way on his desk looking at this house. And I thought, “Oh, my god,” it was just so scary.

And then a woman from down here, Joan, Joan—anyway, she came. We’d come across the street bearing little covered dishes, and in no time at all they were married. I think that was the house that the dog had been in. Anyway, the place was a mess. They had a lot of cleaning up to do. One Christmas they had a party there. All the lights went on, people came, a party happened, and then it all disappeared again. [laughs] It was like magic. And they finally got it fixed up and lived there. I think it was Joan that was responsible for getting the machine shop that was D’Agostino’s—where Mr. D’Agostino’s is now—she got it transformed into a grocery, which was very nice. She also did a lot of posing and publicizing and so forth. She was “Joan the Activist.” I can’t remember her real name.

Anyway, then they unmarried, unhappily, and I think one of them went to California and one of them went to Florida. I think they did get together when they were dying. Anyway, so that was a horrible story [Zapol laughs] and sort of hung over this house for a long time.

**Zapol:** Across—cause you were thinking of the place across the way, you just sort of—in what did it hang over that house?

**Burger:** Well, because she had killed herself because she couldn’t get this house, and couldn’t get the other house. I felt sorry for her because I was pretty desperate to get this house! I don’t think I would have killed myself, but I am so grateful for this house. It took everything, every scrap of money we had to get it. At one point we thought we couldn’t quite make it, and Knox had just quit whatever it was. *Collier’s* had folded. He worked for Gold Medal or Fawcett, I can’t remember which one, but they got a severance pay check of 4,000 dollars just in the nick of time. So this was 30,000 dollars, for god’s sake, and the top floor renovation was 35,000. It’s now 10,000,000. It just [sighs] boggles the mind: What happened to all those people that were paying eight dollars a week for a room? There was another one down here. Oh god, what’s the name of

it? Another bar, which is now gone, Ethiopian, by the flower shop, where the rents were also like seven dollars a week. [00:40:38]

And David Day, who I'm trying to get to celebrate on Sunday—he and some Spanish Civil War heroes had been living. This place was so different! It was all rooming houses and sailors' bars and—

**Zapol:** Talk to me about the sailors' influence on the area here. How did you see that?

**Burger:** Oh, well, they were all over. Seamen and homosexuals. There were a lot of goings-on on the trucks down here and the piers.

**Zapol:** Was that even in the late [19]50s when you arrived, or did that develop later?

**Burger:** Well, I'm not quite sure. I think maybe it was a little later. Well, the seamen were here, because my friend Ralph was a seaman, and when I met him he went back to sea a few times, and the waterfront was very bustling, and all the sailors knew each other and drank and carried on, and NMU was built—that building with the portholes—over the protests of the membership, because it was expensive. And it was very lively! The seamen and the movers and many other people had a whole—I want to write a piece about this. David has left us some verbatim accounts. There were huge bars, all across. Everybody knew everybody else. Everybody would drift from bar to bar. And they got into fights [laughs]. At one point—I think it was a place called the Punjab, which was [laughs] known locally as the Punch-Jab, cause everybody was fighting all the time. One night the owner started cleaning all the tables out of the main room, and somebody said, “What are you doing?” He said, ‘I’m giving more room for you guys to fight.’ [laughs] So, they were a very lively crew.

**Zapol:** And the piers were also, just up the road—and down the road, right?

**Burger:** Right! Lots of activity.

**Zapol:** Yes. What was happening at the piers? Did you ever go along the waterfront?

**Burger:** I had a car parked on Pier 40. It was the marine cooking school ship, the *John Brown*, berthed there. I don't really want to go into what was going on at the piers, because most of it was homosexual activity. There's a building there now—it was a parking lot full of trucks, and

people came from New Jersey and desperate Villagers hung up signs saying “We have your license plates.” And it was a pier up—I don’t know exactly—a covered pier that I went into one evening. There were mattresses all over the place, and there were also a bunch of kittens, feral kittens. So I came back the following day with a cat carrier, trying to get one of them home, but there had been a fire, and the kittens and the mattresses and the homosexuals were all gone.

This used to be a much more terrifying area, with people, there were lots more transvestites. Anyway, now it has calmed down considerably.

**Zapol:** When you say terrifying, was there also a—what do you mean?

**Burger:** Well, you know, there were purse-snatchers. There was a murder out here one night. Somebody got knifed. I was sitting here writing. I heard garbage cans crashing around. Somebody had gotten knifed, and he was stumbling down, catching—I found this out later—he died. No, it was not a very safe neighborhood, and my friend Ralph, who lived with me for forty-five years, caught purse snatchers and a burglar and god knows what-all. It’s gotten so sedate since then, thank god. But, no, no, Brian says there’s somebody sitting across the street that I shouldn’t mess with. [00:45:45]

But, no, it was just, it was such a totally unsavory—one homeless man molested my daughter. Ugh. But the police were wonderful. They drove her around, saying, “Could you see him?” She felt so important. I don’t know. I don’t know what the—I don’t [laughs]—I’m not out on the street anymore, but I think it’s quieted down considerably.

**Zapol:** Yes. So it sounds like the police were here, were involved. Were there other ways in which the neighborhood banded together?

**Burger:** Oh yeah, we had vigilante groups. Actually, Brian said there was somebody shooting outside D’Agostino’s just a couple of nights ago, so maybe I’m wrong. It hasn’t all been calmed down. But we had neighborhood groups looking after each other. We had groups opposing Westway and opposing the pipeline up here. You know about that?

**Zapol:** More recently, yes.

**Burger:** More recently, yeah. And we still have radioactive gas in our stoves, in spite of the protests. I forget what I was protesting down at City Hall. Bloomberg turned up and it was freezing weather [laughs]. I forget what we were protesting, but I always thought it was a nice thing to be a warm body at a protest. [laughs]

**Zapol:** Do you feel that there's a legacy of activism in the Village? It sounds like in your own family there's some legacy of protest.

**Burger:** Yes, there was certainly a legacy of protest, and there was a lot of protest going on. I'm out of it now. I don't know what happened to that group that used to meet at Westbeth that was opposing the pipeline. I've kind of lost track of the Sierra Club, which had a meeting.

**Zapol:** When you said you had lived on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, and then you came back to the Village, "thank god," why thank god? What was the Village to you at that point?

**Burger:** Oh, it felt like home! It felt like the place where we all belonged, and my great-grandfather had been here. My other great-grandfather, I think he roomed here and went home on the weekends, back to Staten Island. So we've been around, I think. I sold all my wares at lots of little shops around. I knew other people who did the same sort of thing. It was a very different mix.

You met that young man in the hall? That's a whole different world. They are supported by some financial group that's paid an exorbitant rent for the top floor and sent him and his girlfriend over here to do financial things. It's not art anymore. And on a much different scale, financially.

**Zapol:** I think in the narrative we're still around when your children are young. When did your children start to move out of the house, and what changes did you start to see in the neighborhood?

**Burger:** Oh, of course they moved out. They went to college. See, Neall went off to England for a while, and Katherine—

**Zapol:** This was around late [19]60s?

**Burger:** Yeah.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. [00:50:00]

**Burger:** No, Neall and her friend Andrea hitchhiked across Afghanistan on the back of a Yugoslavian convoy, wound up in Ceylon, where there was a revolution going on. I was terrified when I called the Consul, who found where they were. Neall called back and said, “Oh, we’re all right. They’re not shooting Americans.” [laughs] I thought it was sublime ignorance. And Katherine went out to college in the West and climbed mountains and some of her friends got killed climbing mountains. They’re both, thank god [laughs], much more close to the ground these days.

So, yeah, so they moved out—

**Zapol:** And then the [19]70s was more of a time where it was a little more difficult in the neighborhood, is that right?

**Burger:** I’m not sure, because, well—as I say, I had this friend, Ralph, who moved in and lived here and caught a burglar and a couple of purse snatchers and really looked after the house, which was good. But I don’t remember how much violence was going on. Let’s see. He was here when the piers burned. There was a pier out here. He said there was a lot of homosexual activity out there at night.

**Zapol:** And were you living here at the time, or were you—

**Burger:** No, I was here in [19]59.

**Zapol:** Mmhmm. Yeah. From [19]59.

**Burger:** From [19]59 on. And then one day the pier caught fire and it looked like obviously a set fire. Cause you could see a little fire here, a little fire here, a little fire here, and the wind was blowing fiercely, and the whole pier burned. So, I don’t know how much was deliberately set. And this other fire that killed the kittens. We had a whole village up here, you know. Remember the village on the water? Off Gansevoort, people had built shacks. They had some kind of heating, but I don’t know about sanitary facilities. There were a lot of squatters up there.

**Zapol:** Really? On the pier? Or on the land where the Department of Sanitation is now?

**Burger:** On the piers—oh god, where was it exactly? On piers and on the water. A lot of temporary housing.

**Zapol:** Well there used to be a market there—

**Burger:** Yeah.

**Zapol:** And then that closed. But I wonder if it was even on the land where this was—that you're talking about.

**Burger:** I think it was sort of off the land. There was sort of a gateway, and it was meeting into this place. There were a lot of cats there.

**Zapol:** And who were the people who were living in that temporary housing, or in the shacks?

**Burger:** I haven't the faintest idea, because I went to visit, and I liked the whole idea of people camping out, although the sanitation was a little puzzling. And then suddenly they were just all wiped away, before I ever got to know much about them.

**Zapol:** Around when do you think this was?

**Burger:** Oh, god, a long time ago. Twenty, thirty years? But I'm sure there's a record of it somewhere.

**Zapol:** Yeah, I haven't heard of that. Of a temporary housing out on Gansevoort pier, so—

**Burger:** Well, Gansevoort used to have an incinerator, and on a good day, all kinds of crud would be falling on my porch from the incinerator, so I'm glad that's gone. But I hear they're now having plans to build stuff on Gansevoort, which is not such a good idea.

**Zapol:** Speaking of that area, what are your memories of the meatpacking and the market around there? Did you ever head up that way?

**Burger:** Oh yeah. Yeah. One night, the dog started barking, and I came and found that somebody had managed to take the window box off here, gotten in the window, taken my purse. And the first thing I knew about it was somebody called, "Hey, lady, your purse is up here all over the meat market." So Katherine and I got up—this was like six or seven in the morning—and went

up there, and retrieved my purse, which did not, of course, have any of the money in it. And the place was—there were calf heads and entrails and a whole lot of stuff, all over the sidewalk! It was a very active market. [00:55:10]

And it had been an active slaughterhouse. When I was maybe nine or ten, I remember driving with my father along the West Side, and a cow had escaped from the slaughterhouse. She's galloping and slipping all over the railroad tracks, pursued by two of the men from the slaughterhouse. I thought, "Poor thing." God! I am fairly vegetarian [laughs], but—so where were—yes, and there was Western Beef up there. There were more butchers all over this place. There were butchers! And in fact down on Bleecker Street I'm told there was a place where you could pick out your chicken or your rabbit and have it killed and dissected on the spot. And you could get meat, but now it comes wrapped. You're spared all that blood and gore, but there was certainly a lot of blood and gore up in the meat market district. And during the daytime it wasn't so noticeable, but five or six in the morning, they were out there. And it has become unbearably genteel, with fancy clothing. Where do all the people come that wear the fancy clothing in New York? These days?

**Zapol:** I'm interested to hear you talk about some of those changes, but before we do that—were there other industries in the area—we talked about the sailors, we talked about the meat market, and also your friend who was the mover. Were there other industries in this area?

**Burger:** Well, there was a machine shop where D'Agostino's is now. Well, Pickwick Papers was—and up on Superior Ink. I had friends who worked there. I don't remember exactly what they did, but they printed, I guess. Yes, this was an area of some kind of industry.

**Zapol:** And what about Westbeth? When you were here was it still—

**Burger:** It was still the telephone company, and there was hoards of people going by in the morning and evening. And the train that went screeching through Westbeth, it's now become the Highline. And of course there were ships. You could always hear them coming and going. It was pretty noisy out here. On New Year's, all the ships would let loose, and celebrate. And you could watch the Queen Mary, with an escort of tugs moving out. It was great. And of course we had the ferries. You could ride the ferry, and that was an ocean voyage, and it used to take a lot longer. It used to be quite an experience, to be on the ferry.

**Zapol:** And that would be a ferry from here to take you where?

**Burger:** To take you to Staten Island, which was across the Bay.

**Zapol:** Oh, so it would leave from the piers here?

**Burger:** Yeah, to South Street.

**Zapol:** Oh, yes, yes.

**Burger:** I think there were other—there was a Christopher Street ferry, but I think that was before my time.

**Zapol:** And you mentioned the rail, in your story from when you were a child—trains that were on the street level, before they had been elevated.

**Burger:** Oh, well, for the slaughterhouse, I think, that's where they had a rail down there to bring cattle in. And that was very long ago. I think that's long since gone, but then there was the overhead rail that went through Westbeth. And then there was the West Side Highway. The elevated highway, which I thought was a very nice way to get things in and out of New York. They took that down.

**Zapol:** You're right, it must have been very noisy here.

**Burger:** Yeah.

**Zapol:** And then it was in the early [19]70s when the West Side Highway closed?

**Burger:** I don't remember exactly. [01:00:01]

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Burger:** Yeah. It came down. [laughs] I remember, I once ran out of gas up on the West Side Highway one night. I just made it to the exit ramp, and I rolled down the ramp, and I came out on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, and a bus came along! And I said, "Can you give me a push?" [laughs] And they pushed me across to the gas station! [laughs] I think—so it was—ah! [laughs] Anyway.



**Zapol:** So talk to me about some of the changes you've noticed more recently in the neighborhood. When did you start to notice that—you know, you talked about the neighborhood being more genteel. And elsewhere you've also talked about, you know, company manners versus—

**Burger:** Yes, ok.

**Zapol:** So if you can tell me, when did company manners come in? What do you mean when you say that? And—

**Burger:** Oh, people are much more polite now, and we don't have so many characters wandering around. And the whole thing has just gotten to be much more restrained. [laughs] But there's, for some reason, because there are so many more people, but they all have good manners. It's not—no, there are a few crazies left. There are always a few crazies.

**Zapol:** What, is there a particular kind of irreverence or crazy that is "Village crazy"?

**Burger:** Ah—

**Zapol:** And if so, is there a Village character you can paint for me?

**Burger:** Well, you know Joe Gould. And the lady with the beehive hairdo. Somebody told me that—

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE 'Burger\_OtisKidwellGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3';  
BEGINNING OF THIRD AUDIO FILE 'Burger\_OtisKidwellOralHistory3.mp3']

**Burger:** —somebody set her on fire at one point. I don't know what happened to her.

**Zapol:** Tell me about her. What did she look like? Where did you see her?

**Burger:** She was around. She had this enormous beehive of unwashed hair, and she was definitely a street person. I think she went around scrounging for drinks. I don't know anything particular about her except that I heard she had been set fire to, and I presume it was to her hair. Then there was another lady, in my time, a Southern woman who came out—big woman, she came along—she had a coat closed with a safety pin. She wandered around the street, sometimes followed by her cats. And she was pretty much of a character, and I heard one night that she

owned a building downtown, south of here. The building had caught fire, and she and the cats were killed. I don't know anything more than that.

Of course, there was a stable up here that caught fire one night, and the guy at the end of the block, who was I think a janitor around here, helped get many of the horses out safely. But that was a whole long time ago. And there was a garage across the street that had become an apartment house. Everything has changed. And the Jane Street Hotel was with seamen and all that, and it's become quite posh now. We've had meals there. Anyway, yes.

**Zapol:** When did you notice this shift towards the posh in the neighborhood?

**Burger:** Well, it's been going on for a long time, cause places get built up. I think when Pickwick changed from a paper factory to expensive apartments—I think that was the beginning of—that's when I began to notice it. And, well, stuff had happened. The garage across the street—a friend, Lenny, a very enterprising young man, who painted the front of this house once, he put the house together and built another story or two, and after a while he decided he could no longer afford to live here himself! And he could get more money from renting it. So that was, you know, little changes, little changes.

The two old Irishmen who had the Emerald Food Store, up the way, I hated to give them the bypass and go and shop at the A&P, but the A&P was cheaper. So it's been eroding. But recently I went and talked to a real estater, said, "What's happening?" He said, "The billionaires are chasing out the millionaires." And somebody told me that 25,000,000 dollars for a condo in what used to be Saint Vincent's. It's unthinkable! I would never be able to live here! And many other people cannot. So I'm extremely grateful for having bought this house, having had [laughs] the idea of buying this house, cause I think everybody should have a nice place to live in New York.

**Zapol:** What do you feel are some of the original character—or the character of the Village when you moved here—that's still stayed? What is the links to that Village?

**Burger:** I'm not sure there is one. [laughs] I knew so many people who were doing odd things like, you know, singing and acting and so forth. But I don't run into anyone like that, except at this poetry meeting.

**Zapol:** Tell me about your poetry meeting.

**Burger:** Well, not much to tell. Michael Graves, who teaches and writes poetry, started this group over at the Left Bank Bookstore. It's been going on for a while, and I found out about it and joined it. I had published a lot of stuff back in the [19]50s, [19]60s, and stopped writing, and this started me up again. And this has been a great delight to me and to many other people who, you know, like to express ourselves. And, as I was going to say, it ran into enormous rents that this new owner didn't feel he should be paying, so it's closed. So I had space. So I said, you know, it's a good place. It's very, a nice happy, happy relationship. [00:05:57]

**Zapol:** You've hosted the poetry reading here now. Tell me about who some of the people are who are in your poetry group.

**Burger:** Oh, Art Gatti, who lives on Bank Street, writes poetry. And then Yuyu, who is Nepalese, writes poetry and is all over the place according to Michael. He never hesitates to find a way of publicizing himself. And several other people who I don't know terribly well. David Day. And there is a young woman who doesn't write poetry but recites poetry. And a man from Westbeth who was a painter and does poetry. And a lot of people who I don't really know who come in, who have, you know, varying degrees. There's a couple of mad people, [laughs] who have very strange versions of poetry. Oh, and a very nice guy last time who wrote me a thank-you note, who's up in Cambridge, who's a teacher and writes in Spanish. We have a few Spanish people. I don't know, it's—there's a group in Westbeth, which was run by some woman. They had a meeting there, oh, a month or so ago. I can't remember her name! I have a hard time remembering names without seeing faces. A lot of them have amazing credentials, of having published all over the place. Won prizes, so forth and so forth. But I have not attended any other meetings. I think there's still one going on at—what is it?—Saint Mark's, and a couple of other places.

I had a friend, Patricia Fillingham, in Cornell, who was the only woman in the engineering school. I don't know what she did with engineering eventually, but in her fifties she suddenly started becoming a poet, and wrote very nice, fierce, feminist poetry, and started a press called the Warthog Press. And she wrote—there was, called the Ear Inn, down here?

**Zapol:** Uh-huh.

**Burger:** Ok. And Cornelius Eady, who once sublet this place one summer. A black poet. But, you know, nobody makes money in poetry. Writing poetry [laughs] is now costing me money! People used to pay me! So, if you're a poet, you become a teacher or whatever.

**Zapol:** What are you writing about now? What is your subject matter at the moment?

**Burger:** I write a lot of poems, let's see. The one that I was—oh, god, that one.

**Zapol:** I'm sorry, yes.

**Burger:** What time is it?

**Zapol:** It is almost five o'clock. It's just 4:59.

**Burger:** Ok, cause this other reader is going to show up fairly soon.

**Zapol:** Ok.

**Burger:** I was going to turn in to Tasha. Tasha does my typing. She works at the synagogue over in Westbeth. So she does my typing, and I'm about—[laughs] you want to know what I'm writing about? [00:09:58]

**Zapol:** Uh-huh.

**Burger:** About my bad eyes, being sick, people, things, observations. What's the latest what I'm doing? Oh, about children who have horrors under their beds. Did you have that? [00:10:22]

**Zapol:** I did! [Burger laughs] I definitely did.

**Burger:** You did. What happened to them?

**Zapol:** They liked the dark. Especially after midnight. And they would creep out and sit at the bottom of my bed. And sometimes they would be outside the window.

**Burger:** Whoo! [laughs]

**Zapol:** And you?

**Burger:** Yes.

**Zapol:** Did you have some?

**Burger:** I guess they were under the bed. You had to curl up like this and not let your hands and legs go over the edge. [laughs] And I think my children had them, too. The conclusion of my poem is that the world is so dangerous outside, you probably are safer in bed, if you have a bed. So, anyway, it's—

**Zapol:** Thank you for this today. I'm very grateful for your time. I wonder if there's any Village story that I haven't asked you about you wanted to share today, or that comes to mind when you think of the Village. If I were to ask you, "What is the Village? What is Greenwich Village?"—how would you respond?

**Burger:** Well, how can you say—it's changed so enormously. It was a great mix of interesting people and things and coffee houses and jazz and Chumley's, and a whole lot of things that have gone. It's become the billionaires chasing out the millionaires. It's become much more bland. [sighs] Thank god there are still some interesting people around. But, I don't have much to say to people who have smartphones [laughs] and all that circuitry. I'm just sorry that it's—I'm glad I have this house, but it seems that the whole world has changed outside, and I'm sure that every elderly person of every age has been saying that [laughs]. So, but, no, I'm afraid of what will happen.

People keep asking me to sell the house to them. I know what would happen. It would be changed back into a single family house for a billionaire. I'm not about to do it. So, does that answer any questions?

**Zapol:** It does, yeah. If there's any other story about the Village that you wanted to share—

**Burger:** I can't think, but I'm going to have to tell you about my great-grandfather's book. He's full of stories.

**Zapol:** This is the Wilcox [bell dings] grandfather? Oh! Ok.

**Burger:** That must be—

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**\*and working for suffrage**

**\*\*because father and grandfather were famous abolitionist Quakers**