

FREE ACRES IN BERKELEY HEIGHTS COLLECTION
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Session One

Interviewee: Fritz Schade

Transcribed on June 10, 1996

Q: You've been connected with Free Acres since the '20s is that it?

FRITZ: 1929.

Q: Yeah. How did you come here to Free Acres?

FRITZ: Well that, what, what I tell you. As I told you, my wife and myself and about 250 other young Germans, we had a support organization of 250 members in New York, three branches, one in Brooklyn, one in Manhattan, one in Queens. Then we had a place in White Plains, where we went every Saturday and Sunday to have outdoor sports, chiefly swimming. Was a water hole and we go swimming. One Sunday we got there, the Saturday we got there, the place was surrounded by a galvanized wire fence, and that was our, the end of our recreation area. Then we decided to look around . . . because the group threatened to fall apart. Some went to the nature _____, some went to the ocean, some went to private camps. Some others they, they had their own private groups and went someplace else. And we decided to go out and try to buy a piece of land. It was Depression time, but half of the members were still employed. And we tried to find a piece of land where we could have our own camp, like the nature _____ had.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: So just by, by sheer accident, we had friends in Free Acres, and they told us about a piece of land which we(?) had also intended to buy at one time, but for some reason it didn't come true. A piece of land containing 52 acres of wood, virgin woods, belonging to a pastor of a church in New York on 54th Street and Lexington Avenue corner. So we, his name was Moldenky(?), Edward Moldenky. So we got in touch, in touch with this man. Moldenkys were also native to this area here, because some of the family moved in here in about 1830. They were all well-educated. One of them was metologist(?). And one of their sons or grandsons is, today, I believe, one of the directors of the Botanical Garden in New York. Anyway, this land did belong to this pastor. I also made mention that this particular piece of property was used in 1900, from 1900 to about 1908 for a children's camps, camp . . . of children which were the survival of families that their parents perished in a steamship disaster in the old East River. Remember, do you remember the Slokum disaster on the East River.

Q: Uh-huh. Yeah.

FRITZ: It was in 1900. This, this congregation made an excursion on a boat to Bear Mountain on one Sunday morning, came back at nine. This ship caught fire, and a large amount, a large number of the parents perished in that fire, while the children, they're not with them at the time. They were standing on the dock waiting for the ship. It was only about a thousand yards away from the, the dock, when the ship caught fire. Then this, this church community took up the task to provide recreation for those, they . . . for those children left behind. And they had the Evangelical Sisters in this camp, and the children came there, they were maybe six, seven, eight, ten years old, until they were adolescents and

they didn't come anymore. And the camp was . . . they had a couple of buildings there that has a small pump for water supply, some sanitary installations. But it was not used for many, many years. Everything was overgrown, so we looked at that, and we thought to ourselves, that is the place we could use. Not too far away from New York. And we talked to the pastor, and he offered that 52 acres of land . . . now today, it's a ridiculously low price, for \$4,000. [Questioner laughs] And many here, with whom he had to do . . . with his countrymen, his landsmen(?), he even, and they complained that there were other costs involved, so the costs would probably run up to \$4,500 or in there, or \$5,000. We said, "Okay." He says, "I see you . . . " and sort of _____ [German?] because at that time . . . "and since you are my kirk [Ger., church] people, I let you have it for \$3,700." So we, we called the membership together, and we decided there and then to throw all our money together, issue bonds for so and so many years, bearing interest. And in no time at all, we had about \$4,500 collected, and we bought that camp and started to work there. And most of the people, almost all of the people were mechanics. There were carpenters, there were masons . . .

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: . . . there were machinists, there were blacksmiths, there were painters . . . what have you. Everybody had a trade as the Germans are, and we went to town and worked on that camp. The buildings were made so that they could live in it again. And two years later, even we built a swimming pool. Now this is . . . this is right . . . right next to Free Acres. Now how can you help it, people from Free Acres, they come up there and they go to Free Acres. There was an exchange of ideas, and in no time at all, friendships were there. And

when I personally heard that Free Acres is a single-tax colony, that means . . . a, an association of people who own a piece of land and rents this land out to its members . . . and you cannot buy that land.

Q: Right.

FRITZ: But you live there and pay rent, a modest rent, and you can build your house there, but me being out of work, that was the thing to do. So for only about \$28 I rented a half-acre of land, and I had water and a street and electricity. Now that was a great advantage to me. I intended to build a house on a piece [seat?] of land at that time. I had a half acre of land there. Now where do you find things like that? Now, at the same time, then, there are six others, member of this camp. They also heard about it and they did the same thing. So a new group of people was injected in this population of Free Acres. All the people were mostly . . . I would say . . . around the age of 40. Some were older, some were younger. And not all of them were handy with tools. So this, this new, this new group of Germans there . . . especially me, I was the building man . . .

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: . . . I found a field to work. And, actually, this little bit of work in Free Acres . . . people didn't have much money themselves, then they had, at that time, the times were bad, they had, they had living quarters in New York. They had a[n] apartment there, and then they had a little shack out here. So they tried to improve that shack, give up this apartment in New York and live here in order to save money. So this very fact gave me work.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: I built, for the existing bungalows, sometimes they had to be raised a foot or two by

means of jacks, you know.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: And I built cellars under that. I built fireplaces next to the houses, or into the houses, and chimneys and so on. So it kept me . . . over the years, the Depression kept me busy all the time at a modest income. But in New York, there was absolutely nothing to be done. I never was a burden, at that time, to the public. After they got . . . were very, settled here many, many years ago, they, since long ago, they know each other. They were sort of isolated from them, because Free Acres was an island by itself. There was Berkeley Heights. We had hardly anything to do with Berkeley Heights. We paid the taxes there, but Berkeley Heights never did anything for Free Acres, except school their children.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: Well, so that's the way I got settled, settled here. No sooner did I move out here, they made me a trustee of the organization. And a couple years later, the town clerk guy, in addition to trustee, they elected me town clerk. So I kept the trusteeship for one year, and then somebody else was elected trustee. And I kept . . . and I was town clerk, I kept this town clerkship, I was town clerk for five years there.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: And, of course, at that time it was . . . sort of an honorary job, and later on there was . . . was a small pay was granted to the town clerk. So now that is the story I, I have about Free Acres. I lived there until about 19 . . . 1940 . . . I guess '41 or '42. During the great war, the last war, I had a job in Metuchen. Times get a little better, so I worked outside of Free Acres. I had a job in Metuchen, we moved out. I sold my place in Free

Acres and I moved to Metuchen, build another house there. So you can see by, by having nothing, actually I came here with nothing. I built myself a house there, I built a couple of other houses for other people. I kept a float, I saved a little money. I had my own place. Because I know it gave me a chance to buy a better house in Metuchen. And I lived in Metuchen for three years. But at the same time, we had the intention of come (sic) back here. So with the money we got from the sale of the house, we bought a piece of land in cooperation with another neighbor, a piece, four-and-a-half acres of land. We bought that for only \$3,500 at the time. It is right up here. Old Farm Road.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: And then three years later, we sold in Metuchen again, and we came back here.

Q: Why did you come back here?

FRITZ: Why?

Q: Yeah.

FRITZ: Well, we liked the environment here.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: The woods, the quiet and the fresh air. And what, also what attracted us to Free Acres was the liberal spirit of those people there. There were all kinds of religions. There were Catholics, there were Protestants. There were . . . one-third were Jewish people. There were writers. You hear about Tom Smiths(?)?

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

FRITZ: He, he wrote his stories over there. There were actors . . . James Cagney had a place here. Then there were other authors. There's an author by the name of Bakovese(?),

Alexander Bakovese(?), a Hungarian. He was an author; I don't know which book, book he wrote. Then there were bookkeepers, there were small businessmen, there were lithographers . . . [Coughs] And with those few Germans, actually, the first, the first real craftsmen were introduced into Free Acres.

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FRITZ: Now you said . . . what, what brought us here?

Q: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

FRITZ: Well, chiefly, it was the Depression.

Q: Uh-huh. I see.

FRITZ: The fact that there was no work to be gotten in, in New York. Now, others were a little better off. For instance, I have a friend, our neighbor, by the name of Green(?). He came from the neighborhood of my town in Germany. He came from Dortmund, while I came further north from the coal region, _____ [in German]. So he came here because he saw it's cheap to live . . . and he traveled every day to New York with, with the train. Later on, he find work around here. He was a tinsmith.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: He worked for a long, long while for Carrier Air Conditioning. And at one time he got me a job in air conditioning, too. And I worked in Newark for about two years. That was the first good money I made in about six years . . .

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: So . . .

Q: What time was this, now, that you got the job at Carrier?

FRITZ: At Carrier? That must have been around 1936, '37.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: Yes. Now, you said what brought us over here. Now, what else can I tell you?

Q: Yeah.

FRITZ: That's what it is. It's what . . . was, really, a necessity on our part to look for income.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: And I found it here. It wasn't much, but we kept afloat, and I wish I could live through the times again. We had, at that time, we had two children, the two boys. And we did very well. Then, then, later on, in the '30s, if you remember, before the last war, you hear about FHA loans . . .

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: . . . for housing and repairs. This came through, and many people took advantage of that. So I built two houses on Old Farm Road . . . and those people got FHA loans. Mind you, a five-room house, I built that for about \$3,900. Of course, the lot is not included.

Q: Uh-huh.

FRITZ: Now . . . so, and oh, of course the people did a lot of work themselves on the outside. So that all kept me afloat at that time. It didn't make me a rich man, but, as I tell you, I told you, we stayed here until about 1931, and then we moved to Metuchen. But the intention was to come back here. And that happened in 1948. In 1948, in the fall, we moved back here and we settled on Old Farm Road. And we lived there until 1962. We had a buyer, it was a big house and we were only two people, my boy . . . [Tape interference.]

Thunderstorm . . . for ten days, there was no . . . no . . . [Tape interference] Well, anyway, we had one son, and my son married, and we had a big house there. So we sold that house, and, in the meantime, we had about, in this area, fifteen acres of land. I was a builder and I thought I'd develop all this land around me. It was this land here.

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FRITZ: And this house was included. So we moved into this place here. And this place also was originally occupied by a lady by the name of Amy Mary [Mali] Hicks. Amy Mary [Mali] Hicks was a stage clothes maker. In other words, if a play was to be in a medieval age, medieval ages, she would design and make, of course, to make the costumes for that particular play. She was a specialist in that.

Q: I see.

FRITZ: And she was also very much interested in Free Acres, but she, herself, never lived there. She lived . . . in this area, we had four acres of land here. And they were all . . . and she was a stage lady, you could tell that, because they tried to carry on, in this area, Shakespeare's plays. [Laughter] I could see terraces built with flowers on them, you know. But that's not, not here anymore. _____. Well, now we lived in this place here. I improved it. This was just a . . . you can see it, this house was built in 1900. And the people who built this house originally, you wouldn't believe it or not, they were Frenchmen and they intended to use it, use the whole area here, they had land around here, to grow mulberry trees in order to feed silkworms. Because people came from Lyons, in France. Did you ever hear of that?

Q: Yeah, the silkworm industry. Yeah. Okay.