1977 or '80

Leo Libove (interviewed by Peter Berlinrut (I think?))

Leo Libove came here in August 1936 and when he came he said that there were only about 7 houses built; there were no streets; the roads were muddy patches; very few automobiles could get through and there were no facilities. All in all, it was very primitive.

Q. What was the nature of Benjamin Brown's initiative? What role did he play.

A. Benjamin Brown had a farm here in Etra. He was an idealist, and he wanted to establish an agro-industrial community, ~~partially for those in the needle trade industry~~ for the Jewish people, particularly for those in the needle trade industry. because it seems that in that ~~time~~ point in time, Congress had enacted a Subsistence Homestead organization, and money was available for this purpose; and it was a great experiment, and he felt that with his experience and abilities that he could start such an enterprise. Originally he had tried to start one on his own farm, but it didn't succeed , mostly because he was lacking in funds and here was a source of funds available and he thought it could be useful to this purpose.

(In answer to some further questions, Libove continued:) Benjamin Brown was the moving force in this rather than the Federal government. He had started by organizing a group of his friends and some of his business associates and some wealthy Jewish people in New York; also some Union labor leaders, and it was his idea to

start this, but apparently he felt that the government could do it much better. I think he approached the government in some respect and I think that was one of the moving forces.

Q. Is it true that there were some clashes, as I heard, that on the one hand Benjamin Brown wanted a Jewish Farmers Cooperative primarily, butthe government wanted more of a representative community - a small town. Was there any such clash?

A. I wouldn't know. I really don't know. I knew he was interested in the Jewish needle trades workers. That's what he was after. As to whether the government had other ideas, I really don't know.

Q. How did ~~murder~~ [illegible] the project?

A. In 1935, my mother-in-law happened to notice that there was an article in the Jewish press stating that a group of people were interested in establishing an agro-industrial community and they had meetings in New York and I attended one of those meetings. In fact, I attended several of those meetings. At that time there was a Mr. Grace, who was apparently a spokesman for the group, and he gave some of the details about what was planned and what was to be done and he had this idealistic arrangement that was in his mind and in Mr Brown's mind, and it sounded very interesting. And I was interested because I had had an education in agriculture and I felt I could be useful in a project like that; I felt it would be an improvement in my way of living, and the only thing was that it required a payment of $500. to join this group.

Q. Approximately when did the first settlers arrive?

~~A.--We-got-here-first-in-August-of-1936-in-a-rather-round-about way.~~ ~~Onexofxthexentexprisesxofxthexfactoryx~~

And how soon after the arrival of the first settlers did the cooperative factory get under way?

A. I think it was shortly after the first families came here. I think it must have been in about the end of 1936.

(somebody else asking questions. who?)

Q. Who were the first families that got here, and why did they come? Was the factory established before the families started to come?

A. They came to work in the factory and at that time the factory was in the process of making samples for the garment industry and for the millinery industry at the same time.

A. (somebody new answering)./ {I think it's Fay Libove} They weren't living here yet, but they came from New York to make the samples and I was among them. And Mr. Leefer picked me up in New York; he was in charge of the millinery enterprise. But nobody was living here yet. We just came to work in the factory. We came in to make up the samples, I in millinery and some of the others in garments, and then back to New York we drove and we had to take these samples to the various stores to try to sell them - to get orders. Before they could have people coming out to work here they had to have orders. And the first people who came out to live here came after the factory was established.

Q. How was the factory run? who had final authority? was an executive elected or appointed by the workers? What input did the workers have in the way the factory was run?

A. The factory was run by a Board of Directors and they were selected from the general group of working people. One of them I think was the manager. I don't really know too much about this factory because I was working on the farm.

(In answer to some specialized questions about the factory, Libove answered as follows:-

A. I didn't know for sure but I heard rumors. I knew they were having difficulties; I knew they were having financial difficulties; I know they had trouble selling the material that they did manufacture, etc. But the specific details I really don't know. We attended the meetings, but we didn't take a real interest in the factory.

Q. What were the milestones leading to the failure of the cooperative?

A. I only know about it roughly. I know there was a lot of mismanagement from what I've heard and from what I had been told. But that's about all I can tell you. There was certainly mismanagement both in the factory and the farms.

Q. How did the failure of the factory affect those people who were already settled here? Did they withdraw? Were they disillusioned?

A. Oh yes. Some were very unhappy about this. Of course, you know, they had to make a living, so some left, not many, but some

did leave. Some worked in New York and in Philadelphia and they did find other places to work. But they had become more or less accustomed to the social life. There was a sort of fraternal feeling among the groups and they didn't like to leave, but some did.

Q. What total of the entire development of Jersey Homesteads was assigned to farming?

A., The entire Homesteads was 1200 acres and that included the community. I think it was about evenly divided. Half was in farming and half for the settlers who worked in the factory. The farms were also managed cooperatively. There was a Board of Directors directing the farm effort. The manager was a man named Louis Cohen, and the original selection specialist, a Mr. Finkler, somehow got himself selected as manager of the farms. Apparently after he got through selecting the people for this project something had to be done for him, or with him. So he became manager of the farms. It was a cooperative effort. We were supposed to produce for the settlers. But it couldn't work that way because if we produced 100 acres of potatoes, they couldn't use 100 acres of potatoes, it was out of the question. Nor could they use all the eggs we produced. So we had to go out on the open market and sell this produce.

Q. But the things that you did produce, were they sold at cost price to the settlers of the town?

A. There was very little interaction. The only thing that I can recall that we did cooperatively was that we prepared plots of ground for them for gardens and we charged them whatever it cost us to do the plowing. The two parts of town were quite separate.

Q (unknown) How was the land that was used for developing the town of Roosevelt acquired?

A. It was bought by a man named Mr. Sklover(sp), who had a relative who was one of the settlers here, and on the q.t. they went around buying up farm land. They had to do it quietly because if anyone had known that the government was interested in establishing a ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ community here, the prices would have gone up, so they went about quietly buying up about 4 or 5 different farms in the area that were joined to each other and that way they acquired 1200 acres,

Q. How was government carried on in the town? Were there elected officials? What authority did the federal officials have? Was there any clash between between federal officials and town officials?

A. The community had a federal official in charge, a Mr. Simon, and his say-so was the final say-so, I do believe. But we did elect a Mayor and we had a Council of our own. The settlers elected their own mayor and Council and there was no clash between the elected officials and ~~the~~ Mr. Simon.

Q. What do you recall about the school for the children or the store for the town?

A. It was the first year the school was used. There were very few children here. I was on the School Board that first year and that was in 1936.

Q. What about this $500 membership. Can you tell me about that?

A. To become a member of the community, we had to contribute $500 per family. This was also to help finance the factory. Apparently, they had planned on 200 families, and $500 a piece would give them quite a sum of money to help finance the ~~family~~ factory, in addition to what the Government would give, and that was the main reason for the $500. There was a Board of Directors for the factory and a Board of Directors for the farms. The factory Board consisted of 12 members of the garment workers, and for the farm it was 6 farmers and 3 garment workers. The farmers didn't understand the problems of the garment workers and the garment workers didn't underssand the problems of the farmers and there was some difference of opinion when it came to using money when it came to preparing plans for the farms. For instance, the farmers would say, "We need so many hundreds of dollars to buy fertilizers for so many acres of potatoes". And one of the garment workers would say, "Well, use half". But there were certain things we had to have which they didn't understand, and, of course, the farmers didn't understand the problems of the factory work.

Q. What constituted the farm land?

A. There were several farms. There was a Holtz farm, a Reilly farm. The farms were all within the Borough limits. The ground that these homes stand on were once good potato land; probably still is. Of course, they had to build the houses somewhere, so the government planners laid out the plans for the Borough and they established a water plant and a sewage plant. Originally they had planned for 500 families, but it never did materialize. First of all, there were never more than 120 garment workers in this community, and only a few farmers.

Q. Where did the farmers get the money to work with, because you obviously needed money to hire a manager, and you also needed money for some other

things. What capital did you have?

A. There was a government subsidy. I'm not sure it was exactly a subsidy. There was an investment on the part of the government which they never got back. I think in 1939 they declared this whole community a cooperative failure and they decided to withdraw all their support from it. There was no more money forthcoming. They had made several loans to the garment factory. The first year the farms were in business they made money, but, in fact, the farms weren't managed very well either. And times were bad - this was shortly after the depression - and I remember selling apples from the farm orchard for $1 a bushel and it cost us more than that to spray them. So we couldn't really make a profit. Potatoes were 60¢ a hundred pounds and we couldn't make out. Then there was also a dairy farm which was bought later. The original purpose of the dairy farm was to supply milk to the community at cost, but we found that 50 cows could produce a heck of a lot more milk than this community could ever use.

Q. In other words, the community wasn't able to benefit from the fact that it had farms. It could have done as well if it had bought produce from the neighboring farms.

A. There was another reason for the farm, and that was to supply a source of income for the community garment workers, when it was slack in the factory, they would help out on the farm, but the farm rates of pay were only 25¢ an hour at that time and they didn't want to work for that. They were union members and they felt that if an industry paid so little, it wasn't worth preserving. Besides, they weren't used to that kind of work, it was hard physically. Some of the kids did for a while, and some of them worked their own garden plots. But just a few, a very few, did that. They figured it was cheaper to buy their vegetables than to produce their own, and from a dollar-and-cents point of view, they were probably right. Of course, if

they had figured their labor, even at a very low cost, it didn't pay them to grow their own vegetables.

Q. What did you do with the excess milk?

A. We sold it at the open market. We took it to a creamery in Hightstown, they would pastureize it for us and we tried to sell it to a cooperative group in Philadelphia, but times were so bad that they couldnd't pay for the milk. So after we had had it pasteurized and delivered it, we couldn't collect the money for it. So that idea fell through and we simply sold the milk xxxxxxxxxxx to the creamery and they paid us - at that time I think it was 6¢ a quart, and we just barely made out because the dairy wasn't operating properly at that time either.

Q. There also was a 40-acre orchard. Where was that?

A. That orchard was owned originally by Mr. Holtz, whose property the government bought originally to establish this community. That orchard had 33 different varieties of apples. Most of them didn't bloom or blossom at the same time, we couldn't spray them properly. We pruned them at different times, whenever it was necessary. But there was only 1 block of about 3 acres of Macintosh apples that wasxxx profitable, and for 3 acres it didn't pay to have all that equipment available, so we pulled out the entire orchard and planted corn and string beans there for which there was a better market than for the apples. And there was also 15 acres of asparagus. But you see what happened. When old Mr. Holtz would remove a tree from his orchard, he would plant another tree but of a different variety. So here we had 33 different varieties of apple trees, and some of them were not commercially useful. But we had very interesting trees.

Q. Let's get back to the community. What kind of social life did you have there? It was a homogenous community, mainly Jewish, wasn't it?

A. It was one big family. Everyone went to everyone else's party and wherever you went you were at home and whoever came here was made welcome. My brother arrived one night (I think this is Fay talking), and it was dark, there were no

street lights, and the Rappaports lived on the main street, and they saw this young boy wandering around, so Mrs. Rappaport called him in and asked who he was looking for and he replied that his sister lived here and he didn't know where, and when she sked the young man his name and he told her, she said that his sister was probably at the meeting and invited him into her house and offered him food and wait here until she gets home. And that's exactly what used to happen around here. There was singing and dancing and great gathering together. Everybody was in the same boat; there was no such thing as rich or poor. Everybody was poor. There was nobody to envy, and nothing to look down or up to, and since the people were all about the same economically and socially, it made for a good life.

Q. What was the average age about that time?

A. Most of the people were in about their 40's. We were among the youngest. That's why we're still here.

Q. What was the rent scale for the houses?

A. We paid $16 a month. Some were $14 and I think some were $18.

Q. What is your sense of the impact of this community on the surrounding area?

A. Well, they didn't like us. Hightstown was anti-Jersey Homesteads and also anti-Jews. But I think that once the buying power of this community became apparent in Hightstown, opinions changed and they began to tolerate us, Because we did begin to bank there and to shop there, so opinions began to change a little. But in general, we were the communists, the kikes, and the Jews. The people called this town "Jewtown". And the chuldren who went to the school in Allentown had a very hard time.

Q. Can you think of any important milestones after the failure of the factory?

A. When the factory failed, the farm seemed to be going down the drain; the government withdrew its support and declared it all a failure. And then they decided to sell the homes to the residents, and to divide up the farmland for the few farmers that were there and everything was evaluated. The farm land was evaluated by the Bank of Cooperatives as to its value and we drew numbers out of a hat to see who gets what section of the land. The land was divided approximately equally among the 5 farmers that were there. It was a strange arrangement. We paid $11,500 for the farms, but we had to pay for whatever crops were in the ground at the time, even though we didn't know what they would produce. We had to pay for whatever equipment we had there. Everything was charged up against the cost of the farm. Potatoes in the ground were estimated at so many bags per acre, which I never got out, and the tractor was evaluated at the price of used machinery - it was fairly reasonable. At that time land was selling at about $80 an acre .

Q. Did World War 2 have have any important influence on the history of the town?

A. I believe it did have. A number of the young men went off to war from this town, but actually I don't think it had much effect. ~~By that time, most of the houses had been sold and the cooperative~~ The houses weren't sold until 1949 and the farm also was sold in 1949. At that time only those people living on the premises had first choice to buy; it was not yet open to outsiders. If they refused, if they thought the price was too high, they didn't have to buy, but then it would be sold to an outsider. In fact, the dairy was sold to a outsider. He was an assistant to the Farm Home Administration office in Freehold. He heard that the farm was being sold and nobody wanted to buy it - the people working on it didn't want to buy it - so he bought it and there was a market for the property. I don't know what he paid for it but it was considerably less than we paid for it.

Q. Has anybody given any thought as to what the lessons were as regards the feasibility or the practicality of cooperatives in what took place here in Roosevelt?

A. Judging by what took place here, I think it's evident that you cannot build a cooperative just because you call it a cooperative. It's like throwing a kid in the water and saying "swim". It's either swim or drown, and most of the time they would drown.

Q. They took an industry which is the most difficult industry in the world - competitive, seasonal, unpredictable, dependent on fashions, and they tried to weave it in to an organized, orderly, cooperative thing, and it seems to me they couldn't have started with a worst industry.

A. Well, it's a highly unionized industry and the union was not interested in having work done outside of New York because it would take away work from New York members, and there were difficulties. I think at first, Dubinsky, who was head of the ILGWU, was at first in favor of a factory out here, but I think that later he reneged on the whole deal. There are different forms of making garments. There's a type where the manufacturer makes his garments and sells them; other types where they contract them with distributors, and somehow it didn't go well here, because, under the influence of Mr. Brown, the people followed him and they decided that they would like to manufacture and sell their own garments, ~~and~~ whereas there was a better chance where if they had worked for an outfit like Sears Roebuck they might have done better. I don't know too much about that but I think they followed the wrong leader.

Q. That's what Morris Chasan thinks. He thinks it was a mistake to give Benjamin Brown a voice in this cooperative. They should have listened to somebody with a

very practical and experienced sense of garment making, garment selling and garmen' producing.

A. But he was the founder of the community in a way and people had faith in him , followed him around; he was their idol in a way and of course he still is. H

Q. I understand that he was a man who was more interested in farm cooperatives and th than in factory cooperatives

A. He wasn't active in the farms at all.

Q. The story is that he originally wanted a Farmers Cooperative but when he learned that the government would not support such a project, that he finally decided to go along. So it is surprising that you should say that he did not take an active interest in the farming. He may have been just a Zionist idealist for whom the life of the soil was the only true life but of which he had no practical knowledge.

A. He felt that the farm would be another source of income for the garment workers, That they would work on the farm during the slack season and it would help them. But that didn't work out at all.

Q. Where was the dairy?

A. The dairy was at the end of Nurko Rod, about 3 miles from #571. Originally it was a dairy farm that was owned by Charlie Field, who had a hardware store in Hightstown, and he had a son who was working it, but he wanted to get out of there, and we were looking for a dairy. So first, we thought of building our own dairy right on this Borough property and we got several contractors to come and give us quotations. But as long as it was a government project and they thought there was money there, the quotes that they gave us were so outlandish, we turned them all down. We couldn't afford a dairy farm for $100,000 which should have cost about 20 or 25. So that idea fell by the wayside. But there was this Charlie Fields farm that was for sale, so we decided that it was more economical to buy that farm than to build our own, and there were 50 old cows there, so we did buy that farm with the approval of the government and they put up the money. But it

wasn't managed right, because first of all, a dairy farm needs a certain amount of labor. It needs labor to take care of the cattle, and to do the field work. After all, there was 100 acres of field there that had to be worked to produce sillage and grain or hay; and I think we had 3 people taking care of the cattle, just milking. We had Rockoff and Harmon and there was one more man there and they found that they just had time to do the milking. It was mechanized milking. And what happened was that they didn't even clear the manure away properly. So, what happened is that a government inspector, a dairy inspector, came along and shut the plant down, and here we were, stuck with 150 cows until the place was cleaned up. So the entire agricultural force that were working the other acres of land (and I was one of them) came down and we cleaned up the place and we planted the crops for them and we harvested and we made sillage and we even hauled the milk to the creameries sometimes. It wasn't properly managed at all. Harry Katzenellenbogen was supposed to be a dairyman (he had taken a short course at Rutgers); he couldn't even tell the age of a cow, and he was supposed to take care of the dairy. First of all, he didn't like the idea of gettirng up at 4 in the morning, which is one of the prerequisites of dairying, and he couldn't even milk a cow; he had trouble stripping them. It wasn't his fault because he was really a pharmacist originally, and he was selected to be a dairyman.

Then there was also a poultry farm because the dairy farm had poultry buildings on it. So I remember I sliced the poultry buildings in half and made 2 sections and we had a building mover haul them over near the cemetary, and we built the foundations for those poultry buildings and we set them down and established a poultry farm there and a Kornbluth and somebody else worked it and they made a few bucks there. But it too began to run down. The exact reason I don't know. But we found we weren't making any money, and when the government closed everything down, that was another department they closed down.