

Irving Bach - interviewed by E. Datz and F. Hepner 6/20/82

Q. How did you first hear about this place?

A. We read about it in the paper that some people in the government were planning to establish this Homestead, primarily for people from the Dust Bowl, probably for the clothing workers union, sometime around 1933, 1934, I really don't remember exactly what year, but I was graduating from High School at that time and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and I wanted to become a farmer finally. We heard about this and it sounded great, and by the way, I was born in Vineland and I wanted to get out of the city. I was living in New York at the time. In fact, I lived in New York for about 10 years. So it seemed like this was an opportunity to get away from the City, to get back to the country. And I also had applied to the National Farm School, which is now the Delaware Valley College of Arts, Science and Agriculture, and I was accepted there and was going to go for a semester, and their semester didn't start until April, and I had graduated in February. All of these things seemed to gel around that time. So my Dad and I wrote to the address in the paper and we became involved, and we eventually were one of the 200 people that they accepted. We used to have meetings in New York before we ever came out here. These were briefing meetings, in order to explain what was going to happen, etc. In the meantime, I went to farm school and the farm school had previously told me that their 3 years would be credited toward Rutgers, if I ever wanted to go to Rutgers to complete my education. When I got there I found out that this was not true. What would happen - maybe - is that Rutgers would allow me to test out for some course, so I became somewhat disenchanted with the Farm School, which was in Doylestown, Pa. . At any rate, around October '35, they had just started work on the Homesteads, so I left school and came here, got a job as

an apprentice. I worked as a carpenter. I lived with Bressler at that time. They had a place in Perrineville and that's where the Kessler boys lived then. The names are hard to remember, but Bosco, and the Jacobs boy and Kunyin's older boy lived there too. Altogether there were 7 of us.

Q. What was Morris Bressler doing in Perrineville?

A. He rented a home there while he was working here on the project. I left home when I graduated from High School and my parents were still living in New York. My father was a garment worker at that time. In fact, many, many years ago he had had a garment factory, with his brothers, and then he gave that up. He was a sample maker. As a matter of fact, because of him, I was able to work when I was 6 years old. At any rate, I came here to work and did that until the people began to move in, and then I went back to Rutgers, and worked part-time here. I worked with Plungian at all sorts of things. And then my parents moved out in '37. My dad was employed in the factory as a Production Manager.

Talk~~d~~ about some things that were negative - one of the things that I believe they did not do when they informed the 200 people who were coming out here, was what a Co-op was really all about. The people had to have down payments of \$500 at least to buy stock in the business. Many of them, I'm sure, like my parents, had to turn in insurance money and what-have-you, in order to get that amount. They were not wealthy people. Almost everybody was from the trades. Anyway, these people all felt that they were owners of that plan, so ~~that~~ they could tell the managers what to do. And this was really one of the problems. I remember walking through the plant, and instead of my father telling

others what to do, they were telling him what to do. Personally, I believe this was one of the reasons why the plant did not succeed.

Q. Do you think this was a government shortcoming, in that they didn't really educate the people?

A. If you want to blame the people who were involved, and who happened to be working for the government at the time, that was a government shortcoming to be sure. I don't think it was deliberate on their part. They took things for granted. They knew what it was; some of us knew what it was. I was involved when we got here, unofficially - some of us like Sidney Gushen, Oscar Nisnevitz. We went around to some of the other projects, one in West Virginia, one out near Pittsburgh. We would talk to the young people. The young people were quick to understand what cooperative meant. It wasn't a Commune, and it wasn't a place where everybody was the boss. But for the older people, we apparently couldn't get across to them what it meant, that they were just shareholders in a business, and that you hired people to run the business, and if you didn't like them, you could fire them and hire somebody else. I think the government people from the various agencies - and we went through a number of agencies, I think they were sincere, but they just didn't know. They weren't teachers, they weren't sociologists, they were just people who didn't understand people.

Q. One of the things that other people have suggested to us as reasons why it didn't work too well is that they took families where the parents were too old and set in their ways. Of course, old is relative, and maybe they were 40 or 45 at the time, but they were set in their ways and it was just too difficult for them to make the transition.

A. No. I don't think so at all. They did want, we wanted, not they, we wanted all the conveniences that the City had even though we were out here in a little rural area. It would have been nice to have the transportation, lights all over

the place, a good road - when we first got here we didn't have a paved road, there were ditches along both sides of the roads. That was the change, but very, very few of the people were people who were born here in the States, who were born in the City, who knew nothing else, so it didn't take them long to accustom themselves to this type of life. I don't think that was the real problem. In the beginning one of the real problems was to get something for the youth to do. It is 5 miles from Hightstown, and Hightstown is not exactly a thriving metropolis. So we tried to do something. We opened our own little store on the corner, where there was at least a place they could congregate and could call their own, and it worked out fine. It was not the grocery store. We had a tea room right on the corner - a sort of an ice cream parlor, and it was great. Of course, as time went on and the kids grew up, there was no need for it anymore. They went to work and they just outgrew it. When we came here, the young people, in other words, those approximately my age, maybe 5 years older, or 2 or 3 years younger, High School graduates, 18, 19, maybe up to middle 20's, maybe upper 20's, we had our own little group. We soon found out that there were young people in all of Monmouth County. Freehold had a group, Long Branch, Keyport - and we belonged to a part of, and began organizing an inter-County Y Association, which had nothing to do with YMCA or YMHA, the "Y" just stood for youth. At one time I was secretary and I had a list of about 600 people our age. We used to have dances, and we would go, as a community, to the various functions. Some of the kids eventually married, who had found their partners at these dances. We had dances here at the school through the WPA; we were able to get some funds from them, and we hired bands and Wednesday nights we held dances with other young people and it was no problem. The problems were in the running of the factory, in giving people the opportunity to make a living.

Q. Did you ever have meetings of the factory to decide what you should do, and say to the people, "Here's the problem. We have to do such and such." "

A. They would have meetings but they never could arrive at a real decision. We had factions in town. It's interesting, as I think back. For instance, Mr. Drasin and my Dad were bitter enemies when it came to how the factory should be run. And yet, I heard Drasin say that one problem he had with my father was that he was always right, even though they disagreed. We liked Drasin; we never spoke against him. It was just that they had different ideas about how the goals should be reached.

Q. When you first began to organize, did you get to meet Benjamin Brown?

A. Oh yes. It was his effort that got the place started. As you may have heard from other people, he was involved with the government and he had been sent to Russia many years before trying to organize cooperatives over there, and that didn't work out as planned. And he had visions, among other things, of starting a community for the Jewish people, to take them out of the City, and at the same time that he had his vision, the Resettlement Administration, and through the friends that he had there, he was able to get this project included as one of those Resettlement projects. At that time, he was Eastern representative, or Sales Representative, for turkey growers in 11 of the Western States. He had quite a following, and a large knowledge of people who were involved in farming, in government, and he was a man with vision, a dreamer.

I am sure that with his know-how, and his vision, he was able to get people together, people like the President of the ILGWU at the time, people from the Amalgamated, people from other unions, union leaders, and others, to get them behind this kind of a project.

Q. We were given to understand that the ILGWU was not too enthusiastic about this. They were worried about the union members being disbursed outside of the central city area, etc.

A. I think that's more ^{hear} heresy than true. I was at a meeting where Sidney Hillman addressed the people, and he said that they had all told him why it would not work. "Now go out and tell me why it will work, and make it work." So while you may have some people who feel they were against it, theoretically they were supposed to take people out of the City and workers would be taken out of the Union, but it's still the City. The locals would be very much like the New York locals. It would not be like Alabama or Mississippi.

Q. We heard that the opposition came from Dubinsky. Is this true?

A. Wrong. Dubinsky was with them. I'm not too concerned about that.

Q. After you got out of school, were you involved in the farm.

A. When I first came here I did my apprenticeship. I started as a carpenter, and after the homes were on their way, they needed somebody to be an office manager and I applied for it and I got it and it turned out to be one of the little headaches because people began to complain because they thought that because my father was one of the "machers" that's why I got the job, but eventually that sort of talk subsided. So I didn't work as a farmer as such, but over at the farm, because that's where our office was, over on Robbinsville Road where Libove lived. Anyhow, by that time Bresslers had moved to a house down the road, not in Roosevelt, in Perrineville. The Katzenellenbogens lived in that area too. At that time they had somewhere between 200 and 500 acres. This was broken up. We had a piece that was not connected to Roosevelt. It was the dairy farm, down the road a piece, and I think Singer ran that for a time before he bought that home that we eventually bought up on Clarksburg Road. Lipsky lived on the farm, Katzenellenbogen, Libove, and the farms were run like a Co-op. I really don't know why they went bankrupt. I'd rather not surmise what happened.

Q. Did they collapse at the same time the factory did? Did the whole thing come apart at once? Or did they go one at a time?

A. I think that went first. I don't think it had anything to do with the factory. I believe it was more the economy of the country that caused that problem. The farm was producing. The crops were doing well. Also, at about that time the government was beginning to think about selling out the homes to individuals, and the farms were being sold, and each one bought his little piece whenever he could at that time. When I got out of the service, the Singer farm was up for sale, and we bid for it and we got it, and we owned that for a while. I also worked in the store for a while. I used to take Kleinman into the city to buy produce and ^uby some of the groceries for the Co-op. That was attached to the National Co-op at that time, and we handled Co-op products among other products. We had a butcher who lived up the street for a while. The store was running well, but again people didn't understand what a Co-op meant. In those days, at the end of the year, if there had been any money made, it was presumably given back to the people who bought there, and they didn't quite understand that. The people wanted products that would be cheaper than the store in town, I think it was an American store. There may have been an A&P too, but I'm not sure. The American store later became an Acme. When the factory and its kind of existence ceased to exist, then everything else, so far as ^uCo-op was concerned, seemed to fall apart too. But individual differences between people was something I tried to stay away from. I never wanted to get involved in why this one didn't like that one, whatever it might be. I know that people disliked Kleinman because he was a manager, and there were others like that.

Q. Do you remember any particular spirit when people started moving into the houses?

A. That kind of life we enjoyed. Everybody who came out knew one another, since they had met years prior to that, so there would be a little party each night someone else came into town. For a while we tried to have a bus from here, and I drove that for a while, but it really didn't pay. There were just not enough people who were willing to pay. They could stand on the corner and just thumb a ride into town. In fact, I would just take anything they were able to pay. The fare was 25¢ and if they had 23¢ I would take that instead, just to keep the bus running, but it wasn't enough. Many of the people, especially the older ones, like my parents, were just happy to be here. They had gardens, they would listen to the radio, they were just happy to be here. Then when the factory began to run down, they would look for jobs in other places, Freehold and places like that. They were just not in a hurry to move out of here. There was a kind of cooperative social life. There were enough things going on. If Hadassah didn't flourish here, it flourished in town. Pioneer Women did pretty well here. There was a Jewish War Veterans that got started when people came out of the service. We were fortunate not to lose too many people in the service. I remember Oscar Nisnevitz was one. I had gotten a battle-field commission, so I was a hero at the time and there was a little party for that. I suppose that was what helped me become a member of the School Board and the Council too. I served on both of those. We finally had to move when I got a job down in Monmouth (?). I was a teacher and my subject was agriculture.

Q. Do you want to tell us what happened when the boys came back from the war; and what happened to you specifically? Was there anything very special going on?

A. Not really in the way of special. Each of us had our own little parties on the day we came back. Most of them were family-oriented and everybody who was

part of the family would come. It wasn't as though there would be something in the school where the whole town attended. Although, it was an open-house community and nobody ever locked the doors, so you could come in. In our own case, afterwards, when I was on the Council and the Police and Fire Department were my responsibility, and it became a joke when the policeman, Wilbur, who was our Police Department, would come over to the house and he'd walk into the house and would just yell to ask if anybody was in, and it was sort of a joke, assuming that either one of us maybe ^{were} were naked, or had just come out of the shower or whatever. But this was how we lived. So, if anybody had a party, you didn't need to have an invitation, you just walked in and out whenever you wanted to. But most of the young people, when they first came out of the service, had nothing to keep them here. Their jobs were elsewhere, and so they went, wherever it might be. Obviously, this hurt the town. I came back here and my parents had bought the house we lived in. My father had gone back to work in New York and it was a lot easier for him to live in New York. But I worked in Freehold and lived here, and when the job in Vineland opened up, we sold the house and moved there and that was in '53, and we've lived there ever since. I moved away, not especially because I wanted to, but that's where my job was.

Q. Would you move back to Roosevelt? Would you want to live there again?

A. That's a good question. I'm not sure at the moment. The reason I say that is not because of anything against Roosevelt, but where we live now, we have 2 married children; one lives 8 miles one side of us and the other 12 miles the other side of us. If we moved away, we would not be so far away from them but further than we are now. So where we are now, we're very happy. If our children decided to move some place else, we would have nothing against coming back.

Q. Can you tell us something about your activities in town when you came back from the war? For instance, what organizations you belonged to? Can you remember any experiences you had while you were on the Board and the Council?

A. Well, one interesting thing that happened when I was a member of the Council was that we went without water. Our wells ran dry. It was at the time when New York City was having a water shortage, sometime around '47 or '49. I'm really not sure. And it was thought that our water level was so low, and because the city was in a water shortage, it became something for the newspapers to pick up. But what we found out was that the point of the well was clogged, and once that was cleaned up we were able to get water again. But in the meantime, we had the army from Monmouth, bring in a big tank where they put water into it over on Rochdale near where the Klatskins lived, and they would carry water around in trucks and distribute it for such things as toilet facilities. It was quite an experience, and papers like the Herald Tribune, I think, and other papers covered it because of the coincidence of both New York and us being out of water at the same time. The town reacted to this quite well. There was nothing you could complain about. If you had close friends elsewhere or close by, you could go to their house and get water there. I forget exactly how long we were out of water, but we survived, and that was one of our exciting times.

Q. What about the Board of Education? Anything exciting happen while you were on? There are always periodic crises?

A. Nothing, really. There was one other member and I who were teachers at the time. That was Morris Agress. And it was not unusual for the vote to be 7 to 2. It may be because we were both teachers and had a different point of view from the others. As an example, Mr. Kunyin, who was our caretaker at the time, asked for a raise. The whole thing amount^{ed} to maybe \$200, and I don't remember

exactly, whether it was going from \$2500 to \$2700, or \$2700 to \$2900. It was a \$200 raise. And Morris and I were the only people who saw this as a valid raise. This man would come in in the morning at 5 o'clock so that there would be heat by 7, so that the school would be warm when the kids came in. He had no hours in the evening. He would stay. If anybody rented the school, they would be magnanimous by giving him \$5 for cleaning up the place. And \$200 would have meant another \$1 per family in order to help the man along, and they wouldn't do it. Shortly after that, we moved and we heard later that he passed away and they had to hire 2 people to take his place. I'm not saying that the \$200 would have made him live longer, but who knows? But these are the sorts of things that happened. But it happens among people. Each of us has different values and different beliefs.

I don't remember whether there was any crisis in my time about hiring and firing teachers. I'd like to think that it was a good school and provided a good education for the children. As an educator I would occasionally walk into the school room. For a number of years I taught in the evening, so the daytime was available for me and I would sometimes walk in. As a Board member I thought it was none of my business to go in and snoopervise, but I would come in and look around, and I think that the kids were doing well. The kids would leave here and go on to Allentown, and they had problems there because they were the best in that school. They would walk away with awards graduation time, and the other students resented them and also probably because they were mostly Jewish. But I have no doubt that the school here was doing well.

Q. I remember vaguely that there was some sort of a publication. From time to time we've had publications. We have a Bulletin now. What kind of publications were there then?

A. We had at that time a Civic League and we used to put out a little newspaper. Just a little town newspaper. There was no charge for it. Just put

out by the League. Our biggest problem was to make sure that people would give material to me - I was the editor - they would not be plagiarizing something. I found that happened a number of times. Somebody would contribute a poem or some other piece that I knew had been written by somebody else. It was not primarily a literary publication. I think I have some copies laying around and I'll look for it and I'll be glad to let you have some. Harold Cooper was also involved with it in some way. I'm surprised that nobody has mentioned it before.

Q. So you were involved with an organization that was called the Civic League and put out this paper. Who paid for this publication?

A. I had the printing facilities. I had the mimeograph machine, and I could do it and I could type it up, and our own dues, which were very little, was enough to cover expenses. There was no editorial policy. We didn't want to get involved in any of that. In the way of politics - I went to Rutgers and after a couple of years I ran out of money and I needed a job. Somebody told me that I could get a job on the Highway Department. The Highway Commissioner lived in Monmouth County at that time. So I went to see him, and the first thing when I walked into the office, he opened up a book and he said, "Oh, Jersey Homesteads? 340 Democrats and 6 Republicans". He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You get 20 Republican votes and you'll get the job". This was in '38; I was just going to be 21, so Sarah Notterman became the Republican Committee Woman, I became the Republican Committee Man, and we went around to see a lot of our friends who hadn't voted before, and we wound up with something like 32 people voting for some State Republicans. I got a job.

Q. So you sold your soul to get a job, you sold your soul to the Republican Party, to the Devil (this, I must add, was said in fun).

A. Well, we had some devils living here, but they were not Republicans, who were card-carrying members, and I had my own problems with them.

Q. What kind of troubles were they? That would make for an interesting narrative?

A. Well, it would not surprise me if they were involved in some of our problems with the factory and some of the other things, and I had some other personal problems that I am not going to put on a tape. When I ran for the Council, ^{Selma Loble} ~~Estelle~~ was walking with the baby carriage - we lived on a farm at that time and she got to the corner, and two people who didn't know who she was, one accused me of being a Fascist and warning her not to vote for me, and the other one didn't want her to vote for me because I was a Communist. And of course, like in every other place, we had political extremes. When I was on the Council and we wanted to buy a truck, and when the motion came up that we were going to buy the truck, some of us found out that the truck had already been bought, and we had to O.K. what had already been done. Whoever was Mayor at the time had bought the truck. He couldn't make any money on it. That was not the point. But the little bit of power must have gone to his head. He was Mayor at the time, and he knew we needed a truck, there was no question about that. He thought he was doing us a favor. I don't think we could have gotten it for a dollar less if we had advertised for it. The deal was a good deal. But these were the little political things that were bothersome. If he were going to make a few thousand dollars I would say it was done deliberately. I don't think he made enough to buy a cigar. I don't think he got anything from it. It was just a matter of assuming power when he shouldn't have.

Q. Did that ever come up? I never heard that. But was anybody ever accused of making money on this kind of thing, either through the Council, or before that, out of the Cooperative?

A. Oh yes. My dad was accused of having \$20,000 hidden underneath the building and that's why the factory went bad, by some of the oldtimers. That's why

he was always out in the yard working on the garden, because he wanted to make sure that the \$20,000 was safe. But actually, while we were here, we never heard anything that anyone had done that was dishonorable, neither on the Council nor on the Board. The big problem was that Mac Adlerman, who was the Board President, when he said the meeting would start at 8 o'clock, that's when it would start. Some people got annoyed with that because you are really not supposed to start meetings at that time just because it was so scheduled. When I was on the Board, there were some little incidents. We had hired one teacher who was up in her age and it seems like the first week of school, she began to come with finger nail polish, every day a different color. Her face was made up. That's all the kids would talk about. And the Board decided very quickly that we would give her notice. That was not the kind of teacher we wanted here.

Q. Do you remember what year that was? Sometimes we like to pinpoint the time these things occurred. For instance, what years were you a member of the Board?

A. I left the Board in 1953, and I was a member from from '48 to '51. I really don't remember. At the time I didn't think it was important enough to keep a diary.

Q. By the way, what was your father's function in the factory? Was he a foreman or a manager?

A. He was the production manager. Talk about factory problems - one that comes to mind. They hired a man who was Sales Manager. Within a very short time, this man got orders for us from May's in California to Macy's in New York and every big department store in between. And then somebody found out that this man was also instrumental in the factory ordering its thread, and that he was making money on the thread that the factory was buying. Now, in a way of money comparisons, the factory would normally have to spend, let us say, 8¢ for a spool,

and he was able to get it for the factory at 7¢, and then somebody found out that he was only paying 6¢ himself, so that he was making one penny on each spool. The fact that we were getting it cheaper than anybody else, was not enough, but that he was making money, they had him fired. When he was fired, he took all his business with him. And that's the one big reason why the factory went under, because we were stuck with I-don't-know-how-much clothing at that time that we couldn't sell. Brown, who was trying to help out, took about \$50,000, whether the money was his own or he was able to get a loan, I don't know, but he took \$50,000 worth, because I was one of the truck drivers and Max Wishnefsky was another one - and we took these clothes down to Pennsylvania where they had just had some floods in the Johnstown area again, and we gave the clothes to them. First we did try to sell it to some of the farmers out there and we couldn't do that, so we literally gave it to them. But this was the problem out here. The people here just did not have enough education. Business was all down; the Co-op was all down. It didn't have too much to do with the depression. We were coming out of the depression at that time in '35 or '36. Things were not that bad any more. I just don't think that anybody who worked in the factory had ever been manufacturers before. Bernie Leefer's father may have had a factory, a small one - at one time, but he didn't take any part in the management. He was a worker. But most of the people involved had absolutely no experience in running a business.

Q. In an entirely different question, Did you have any problems with anti-Semitism when you first came to this area? Was there any hostility toward you?

A. Not in town, obviously. A little bit in Hightstown. The children, I think, had more of it than anyone else. As a matter of fact, Selma had somebody who came in to work in the house, to do some painting or something of that sort; he turned out

to be the head of the KKK in Cranbury, who hadn't any idea that she was even Jewish. But some of the kids ran into it. Marvin Block was one who had to get aggressive. But some of the older people may have run into some of this in Hightstown, but I personally never ran into it.

Q. Do you think that that anti-Semitism had any effect on the town? Did it make you defensive in any way?

A. Not really. When the war started, fortunately (if that's the right word to use), it wasn't generally known to be a Jewish war. It was a popular war. So the fact that some of us were concerned about the plight of the Jewish people was our own problem. Maybe some people ran into it. But if they did, I'd like to think it was their own doing.. We had one person here who was from Germany who annoyed some of us here. He was a Jewish man who continually talked about how good it was in Germany in spite of the Nazis, and I think I sounded off on him one time.