

High Bridge Memories

as told to George Campbell via e-mail, May, 2010

Message #1

I was born in High Bridge in 1940. I lived at 11 Seal St. with my grandmother Alice Potts as my parents divorced just after I was born. I attended the school on Thomas street which was kindergarten through high school in those days.

My grandfather was plant superintendent at Taylor Wharton and was killed in 1918 while they were building a gas float for the I believe 175th anniversary of the plant.

The trains were a big part of being a kid in High Bridge. From seal street there was a path that went over the branch tracks and went down the hill to Taylor Wharton. I used to throw snowballs down on the hopper cars from the bridge on Thomas street on my way to school. I also used to slip under the cars while parked and also used to walk over the bridge from Taylor Wharton on the spur line and again over the gorge bridge on the branch line. These tracks were busy during the war and well after taking coal to the Pickanany arsenal for quite some time.

My mother was also born in High Bridge in 1915 and still remembers quite well the town when she was a girl.

I cannot see your photos as my eyesight was lost while serving as a marine rifleman during the Vietnam War but I appreciate the descriptions on your site.

Any questions you may have please write,

Message #2

First let me say I very much enjoy your effort regarding High Bridge.

It was a wonderful place to grow up. I am not sure where you lived but guess it was to the west of town. That area above the Exacto plant was undeveloped when I was a kid. I was wounded during my war and my eyesight was affected although I did not lose it all until 1988. I use special software that reads the screen to me. I guess you know there is a photo history of High Bridge available from the town hall.

My grandfather, John Potts was killed when the float they were building exploded and he was burned to death. My grandmother was about 29 and my mom was 3. They lived in a bungalow house on upper church street. The company hired a private railroad car to take him to Easton but he did not survive. I have tried searching the web for details but have found none. He was raised in England and met my grandma at a church function at the reformed church.

My grandmother never again went out with anyone and of course never remarried. I lived with her and my great grandmother until she died when I was ten. She was a child during the civil war and had eight children. Her maiden name was Sarah Morgan and married name was Trimmer. My uncle ran the trimmer funeral home in Clinton.

My grandmothers brother Matt Trimmer worked for the railroad and after losing his young son he was devastated. There were three bars in town, Rudi's near the station on main street,

another bar was catty cornered next to the gas station and the old hotel called the blue star. I think it is gone now but was on main street on the corner next to the street going downhill where the post office is now. I would often walk by and see him at the bar and thought he lived there however he did live in east High Bridge.

The switch engine came across main street next to the bank building and went across the trestle to the plant. Many times I had to wait for it to pass. When I was about 4 an engine derailed just after the bridge and rolled down the hill almost to the ball park. My dad took me to see it, don't know if anyone was hurt. We used to walk over this trestle after school to get to town. There were platforms for workmen to use if a train was coming, about three of them so we were not worried about getting caught up there with no where to go. There was one cop in town, his name was Cliff Kaiser or something like that and sometimes he would hide and if we were caught he would take us home so we could get yelled at.

My grandmother used the money the plant paid her after grandpa's death and bought the house on Seal street. As a kid even in kindergarten I was able to walk to town without fear. I knew everyone on the way and feared nothing. The market in town was owned by Harry Waters and used to deliver. Next to it was a cigar store called Samosa's and had comic books, candy and a soda fountain.

After school instead of walking over the bridge often we would walk on the path that led to the branch tracks and if the hopper cars were idle we would climb over them or roll under. There were two tracks but even at that time only one was used.

I often took the train to visit my mother or dad, mom lived with my stepfather in Westfield and my dad lived in New York. The train used to end in Jersey City and you had to take a ferry to the city. Of course in those days the engines were steam and as the train would come into the station from Easton the curve made it lean into the curve and I was always afraid it would fall on me

The railroad yards were a source of fascination for us kids and we often went into the yards and as often were chased away by the guards.

At the bottom of Seal street a path led over the tracks and down the hill to the main office building of the plant. It was quite steep and my grandmother walked it every day as she was employed doing something on the third floor of the building. I used to walk down the hill as I could see her at work by a window and when the windows were open in warm weather I could get her attention by yelling up at her.

You could also leave the path and walk through the woods to the solitude dam. If you were brave you could walk over the dam and take a short cut to the town beach on the opposite side of the lake. I understand there are a lot of buildings on the hill above the beach but then there was only a girl scout camp. Another source of interest for us boys, we would sneak up to try and see the girls in their birthday suits. Many attempts with no success.

The school had all grades and everybody walked. There were no busses although I guess some kids got rides. My kindergarten teacher caught me doing something on the playground and told me to go sit under the sandbox which was raised and take my punishment. Instead I went in the back door and out the front door and walked home. My great grandmother was sitting on our porch and asked me why I was home early. I gave her some nonsense and she marched me back to school and I was really in trouble, my great grandmother had taught school in lower valley for many years and she knew BS when she heard it.

Message #3

I am off today so here is more.

When my mom was about ten she had a girl friend who was the daughter of the town doctor. The doctor had his home and office on main street, across pretty much from the boro hall about three houses down from the railroad crossing. There was a garage next door going towards the railroad station.

For reasons nobody seems to know one afternoon he killed his wife and daughter then killed himself. His young son about five somehow survived and from a bedroom window looking down on the garage he cried for help.

My mom said she often played at the doctors house and the little girl at hers. There was little crime when I was a kid, as noted there was only one cop and we often saw him riding around in a pre war black car with a siren on top. I guess his only job was breaking up fights at the local bars or grabbing kids like doing things we were not supposed to be doing. I do not know where your high school was located but guess it was up the hill past the reformed Dutch.

There was quite a lot of small business that came up and down the streets with pushcarts. We had a man who sharpened knives, a ragpicker, and a woman who came around several times a week with home baked cakes and pies among others. Grandma could call the market and have things delivered the same day, we had a milkman and a bakery called Duggans that came once a week with baked goods. I believe the store you called AA market was the Harry Waters store at that time.

I have not been back to High Bridge for about twenty years or more but my eyesight was very bad so could not make out much.

You mentioned Mary Ann's corner, there were stories often enough that her ghost had been spotted where she died. Never saw her myself but many rather sober persons reported it. I was almost killed there myself, as I came down off 31 in a snowstorm I did a loop de loop but no one was coming the other way.

Anyway I enjoy writing about my home town,

Message #4

George,

Your efforts regarding High Bridge have brought up many memories. I have thought of little else since stumbling on your site. I find it amazing that the efforts of a man I have never heard of can so affect someone like me a stranger to you as well. I was actually trying a search for my grandfather when I found your site.

I have been remembering how it was when the steam engines would come into the station. It was a manned station at the time and there were many trains during the day as well as the night. Many trains on the branch line as well. How many times would I hear the whistles as the trains passed by at the bottom of seal street.

Even though I was afraid the trains at the station would fall on me I always watched them as they slowed down to stop for passengers. So many clouds of steam, the noise and the

engineer sitting up there in control of something so grand. Of course I never got to ride in an engine, that must have been great.

It seems to me we had a lot of snow in those days and living on seal street we would have a neat hill for sledding. Not much traffic then and also behind the school next to the playground there was a natural slide going to the street below where we would slide on our backsides. There was no cafeteria so we would walk home for lunch or bring it. I remember eating as fast as I could so I could get outside and slide down the hill.

As kids we had no television and everybody played outside summer or winter. I do not remember any fat kids at that time.

It is memorial day and the burro made a big deal out of it. I remember little of the big war but remember marching in a parade. It would start on upper church street and end at the ball park at the plant. I was dressed as a wounded soldier and the girl who lived across the street was my nurse. Funny how certain things are clear in memory while others are not.

My grandmother never learned to drive so if we were going somewhere we took the train or the bus. Grandma tried to learn to drive once, she almost took out our front porch driving a Franklin automobile, before my time. She had a friend who drove. This woman was quite short and grandma was tall. The woman drove a full size dodge and I was once behind them. With the headrest it appeared no one was behind the wheel and grandma was alone in the front seat

We always had a garden and great grandma raised chickens. We heated with coal, the coal yard was on lower main street near the railroad. Until I was six we had an ice box, no refrig. The iceman would bring blocks of ice and install them under the box. We did have an electric stove but great grandma would not use it. She cooked on a cast iron coal stove in the kitchen. As I have said High Bridge was a pretty small town and was pretty much divided by those who lived on the hill and east High Bridge. I was a little snob even then as we looked down on those in east High Bridge. Most of the workers at the plant lived in east High Bridge although the Knox Taylor mansion was on Nassau Street on the upper east side. There was just enough distance that kids from the hill did not play with or even know well the east side kids.

Well I have so many memories I could write forever but nuff for now.

Take care and your work is very much appreciated.