

Godfrey Van Kampen

Interviewed by Kay Yeomans in 1977

at the Queen Anne Victorian home of Alan & Shirley Newman

The home was built by Garret Hopper in 1980

as a wedding present for his daughter Mary Christina Hopper Demarest

The Upper Saddle River Historical Society was founded in 1977 as an outgrowth of the U.S.R. Bicentennial. One of the Bicentennial projects was an oral history program started by the U.S.R. Library and continued by the Historical Society. Many of the people who were interviewed have since passed away. We are very fortunate to have their memories on tape. Godfrey Van Kampen was in his late seventies when he began coming to our meetings. He was the eldest son of the Rev. Isaac Van Kampen, a dignified gentleman with a twinkle in his eye that matched some of the stories he told. He shared with us some wonderful recollections of life in Upper Saddle River a century ago.

I was born on June 13, 1899. I lived in Upper Saddle River until I went away to school and then I came back and lived here for a while. Then I was away off and on. You might say I lived here continuously until about 1918 or 1920.

My mother and father came from Michigan. My mother's folks were old Yankees who migrated to Michigan. My father's people were among the early Dutch settlers in Holland, Michigan, and my parents met at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Dad went out to seminary and my mother taught school for a while before they got married. Dad accepted this church [The Old Stone Church] and came out here before the wedding. He boarded with the Terhunes who lived where Knight's Day Camp is now. Dad went back for the wedding in 1893. His best friend from the seminary married them. My mother's name was Pearl Godfrey.

My father officially was minister here until the early 1930s. He wanted to retire, but there was no one living around here and the church was in bad shape because there was no congregation left. They couldn't really afford to hire a minister, so they asked Dad if he would stay on, live at the parsonage and arrange for other ministers to preach or preach himself. So for several years it went on that way. Either he'd preach or arrange for someone else to. He was sort of pastor emeritus. That went on until he died about 1940. I often think of this area as a Phoenix. It was quite a community and then it died. About 1940 it revived. You see, originally the area was settled by the old Jersey Dutch families, the Terhunes, the Hoppers, the DeBauns, all the old names. Everybody was everybody else's cousin. You had to be awfully careful. They lived a rather idyllic life, I would say. It was a nice, peaceful, beautiful country farming community. Then as people got older, they began to want to get away from their farms. They sold them and moved to the cities like Passaic and Paterson and left the farms vacant.

The farms were sold mostly to people from New York for summer places. It may sound funny but they'd have a summer place with the old homestead on it and maybe 60 or 80 acres of land. The taxes were little so it was a good summer setup. They were not real residents though; they were only here a few months a year.

When I went to grammar school, there was quite a period when walking up from Goetschius' house on Lake Street, there was one house occupied, the Filer's house, and the rest of the way up to the Stone Church there wasn't a soul there. The whole place was deserted during the winter. As a kid growing up, I lived like an Indian because we could roam and hunt and fish anywhere. All the land was open. No one gave a hoot. It was all absentee ownership.

To give you an example of how indifferent they were to what went on, we had a man who appeared on the scene about 1908 or 1910. We called him the brook man. This man and his wife camped down by the brook, just on a little knoll in back of the cemetery. They appeared on the scene every summer to camp and finally he decided to stay for the winter. Just east of the bridge at the entrance to the field there, he built a little shack out of old sheets of tin and boards and so on and lived there for several years just as a squatter. Nobody cared. The land wasn't being used. He became quite a fixture, so much so that when they didn't have anybody for janitor for the church, they hired him.

The gypsies used to come and camp in that field there. As kids we were always intrigued by the gypsies. We'd kind of flutter around them and yell at them. We were a nuisance to them. We'd tease them and they'd chase us. That was great sport. They never caused any trouble. They always camped down there because all those meadows were good pasture, and the gypsies always came with 15-20 horses. They were horse traders. They only stayed for three or four days. We never had any complaints about them.

Speaking of robbing, we never had any crime. Old Will Post, who lived on the West Road by Sparrowbush, was the constable and I don't think he ever had anything to do. There was never any crime. I never knew him to arrest anybody. The only thing that ever happened was a couple of times people had a few chickens stolen. Things were deserted and peaceful. His job, Will Post's, was more of a title than a job.

Will Post had the mill on Old Stone Church and the West Road. He was quite a character. I can remember seeing him go up to Monsey. He'd have grain come in at the railroad up in Monsey, and he had a big wagon and a big team of horses and would go up and bring the grain down and grind it in his mill. I don't recall that he had a sign in front of his mill. Everyone knew who he was. I guess he sold his feed to local farmers. He never did much business.

In those days people didn't need much to earn a living. There were a lot of people without much money, but there were no poor people. Some people like the Demarests and the Hoppers were affluent. They could live more lavishly. But the other people never had any problem with enough to eat or anything. A small place was maybe seven or eight or ten acres. Well, they could raise their garden, plant vegetables and fruit for the summer and winter, raise a couple of pigs and a cow, and they were set. Food was no problem. All they had to buy was coffee and sugar and a few things like that. Most of the people were quite self-sufficient. They lived rather snugly and smugly, you might say.

People kept their food cold down in the cellar. The parsonage had a dumb waiter. We put the food on the dumb waiter and lowered it down the cellar and that kept things somewhat cool. There were shelves and tables in the cellar to store things on. Down in Saddle River, a few people had private ice houses.

I was delivered by Dr. DeYoe from Ramsey, and my sister and brother were delivered by Dr. Dingman from Spring Valley. It was a little trying I imagine. I remember when my sister was born. My father had to get the buggy out and drive up to Spring Valley to get the doctor. They had a practical nurse in a week or two in advance. They didn't have doctors much in those days. Most people had the doctor for deliveries though. My grandfather in Michigan was a small town doctor and he used to deliver babies for \$10. The dentist was in Ramsey or Suffern. For a number of years, we went to the doctor in Suffern. He was an old time gent. We didn't go every six months for checkups or anything, only when we had a problem. There was no such thing as preventative dentistry.

When we weren't in school we always had odd chores to do. There was always plenty to do. During the summer, I picked berries up at Eckersons, right up on the hill, up the East Road toward Monsey. That was quite an experience. We'd get up early in the morning and get out to the berry patch at 5 or 6 a.m. because they wanted to have the berries and the fruit ready to take to market in early afternoon. It was a long trip to Paterson with a horse and wagon. I still remember daybreak from the top of the hill. It was beautiful. The valley down here would be in mist, and you could hear the roosters crowing, first one farm and then another farm answered.

I rode my bike up there after eating a breakfast my mother had set out the night before. We made a cent and a half a quart. If you picked 50 quarts in a morning, you made 75 cents, and that was a big deal. It gave us spending money and money for bicycle tires. We didn't get an allowance in those days. Money was a scarce item then. My mother did her own work. My chores included carrying out ashes, cutting the lawn in summer. Clean the stables, curry the horse, get the hay in in the summer. Ordinary chores. And we farmed a little bit. We had a potato patch and a corn patch so there was weeding to do. In early afternoon we'd knock off and go up to the brook, the little pond up the brook. The Weiss boys and I would go up there and go swimming. Or we'd swim in the pond down here. Jacob Henry Hopper's pond was quite an attraction to us all.

When I was a kid it was a beautiful big pond. It finally filled up with silt. He had a rowboat there and it was good swimming. And in the winter, it was good skating. That pond was quite a center. In the winter, folks would come down from the Ridge, Eckersons and those folks. All the young people would build a big fire and spend the evening skating on the pond. That was quite a spot.

The old mill was there. When I was a youngster, the mill still operated spasmodically. Jacob Henry Hopper operated it. Not commercially though. It was on the east side of the East Road. It was a big two-story mill. I used to go down there and watch him saw logs. He was always building little buildings around the place, and he cut all his own wood.

They had a big overshot wheel there, a nice old wheel. It was so big that you could stand on the hub of it and your head wouldn't touch the top. Must have been 10 or 12 feet in diameter. They had a sluice box from the pond, and he'd pull the gate and the water would come out and run over the wheel and turn the wheel and that would operate the saw. I think originally they did operate a grist mill there too. There were some old mill stones there, but all I ever saw it used as was a saw mill.

Jacob Henry Hopper had plenty of money. He operated the mill just for his own use. But he was a very handy man, extremely handy. He built himself a little blacksmith shop in back of his barn, and he shod his own horse. He put his own plumbing in the house. He had a water system. Water systems were unusual in those days. He had a hydraulic ram. They operated on the principle that if you had a fall of water, it builds up a pressure in the pipe and a percentage of that water would be pumped out at a higher pressure. He pumped water all the way from that pond across the street to his house across from the parsonage. In the winter it was inoperative because it would freeze. You could hear that ram thunk, thunk all night long. Connolly's place up above, where Penner's is, had a ram too. At night in bed I could hear the two rams going thunk, thunk.

As far as I know, Jacob H. Hopper was not a close relation to the John A. Hopper who lived in the sandstone house on what is now Hopper Farm Road.* [They were cousins - Ed.] He was known as Jack Hopper. They had a common ancestry though. We had so many Hoppers. That's why they had the system of using two names. We had John H. Hopper, Jacob Henry Hopper, and John Jake Hopper. Most of the men around here in those days were known by two names. A dozen family names represented 90% of the population. A lot of them had the same first and last names.

The Old Stone Church was a quiet, peaceful, nice little church. Strange as it may seem, they had a large segment of their congregation from outside of Upper Saddle River. There weren't too many families in Upper Saddle River because the families had large pieces of property. People came from Tallmans, Airmont and other places, up from Saddle River. The church was quite a dignified place in those days. I often think of it. Some churches I go to now, I see people come in in shirt sleeves, jeans. No one would have thought of that in those days. The poorest person had his Sunday-go-to-meeting suit. A lot of the men would wear pearl derbies or brown derbies. It was quite formal. The women had their fancy hats with ostrich feathers or flowers, fur coats if they could afford one.

They arrived in horse and carriage. A few walked. There was one family up in South Monsey with about 10 members in it. They always walked, a whole procession of them. They had the carriage sheds then across from the church with maybe 10 or 15 covered stalls. Each person had his own stall. They'd pull their carriage in there. And then they had hitching posts outside for those who didn't have a stall. People were quite straight-laced in those days about keeping the Sabbath. I can remember when one family, the Winters, a wealthy family from Saddle River, drove to church in a car. Some people looked slant-eyed at them. Church was from 11 to 12 noon, and then they had Sunday school, too. They had an evening service. A lot of the younger people came to the evening service. I imagine that

was a social event for them. They walked, and they could walk the girls home. A fair number of romances started from meeting at the Church.

They had church sociables. They'd have coffee and cake, play games and so on. Those were on weekdays. The church was more of a social center in those days. There wasn't much else. People did go to the Grange down in Saddle River, but those were the only social organizations around. The church kind of frowned on dancing. They frowned on card playing, too. The old Jersey Dutch were pretty straight-laced. I don't remember any fiddlers playing at weddings or anything.

There were few church weddings in those days. They were generally married in the home, but they'd have a big party, a sociable time. They'd put on a big spread. Sometimes people would come down from New York State and ask my father to marry them. Being right on the state line, all the areas around seemed contiguous, even though they were in different states. But my father couldn't marry them in New Jersey when they had a New York license. So he would take them up to Howard Durie's place and marry them there. They lived up on Ackertown Road, up on the hill. There was a group up there, the Ackers, Duries and Eckersons. They called them the "hill crowd" because they were sort of a clique.

The people around here were more than just Dutch. There were a lot of Huguenots, French refugees who'd gone to Holland to escape persecution. Like DeBauns. Other names in town that I remember from my childhood were Connolly's, who lived up the East Road where Penner's is today. They were only here in the summer. Then there was a man by the name of Will Milsop, who lived right up here. He worked for the Demarests most of the time. Then there were the Demarests where Nature's Creations is, the parsonage, and Hoppers across the street. Then the Messenger's on the corner of Weiss Road, and the Weiss family up Weiss Road a little bit. Then August Tilghman lived in the next house. Then the Terhune house (Knight's), then across from there on the east side of the road was old man Townshend, then below Terhune's where Creative Gardens is, that was the Curtin place. Mrs. Curtin was the daughter of old man Townshend. Between the two of them they owned a couple hundred acres of land on both sides of the road. Below the Curtin place was the Abe Hopper place. That's been torn down since. They were one of the old families. They had a saw mill down by the river. They cut wood, mostly for their own use, I think.

They had an interesting character there. His name was old Sam. Old Sam was a colored man. He lived with the Hoppers. I presume his ancestors had probably been slaves for the Hopper family. He lived there. He didn't get paid or anything. They didn't have any money and he didn't need any. They all had enough to eat. And he used to work around the place and farm it a little bit. Everybody loved Old Sam. In the spring he would let the pond out into a sluice box and get a lot of eels or suckers. Then he'd hitch up the wagon and go around to all his friends and give them a mess of eels and fish. He got a great kick out of that. When he died there was a big funeral. Most of the funerals were at the homes in those days. They didn't go to undertaker parlors either. Sam was pretty old when he died, no one knew how old. Maybe 80 or so. Ageless. He was the only black in town

then. There was one black family down in Saddle River, very highly respected. Other than that there were no blacks around. Earlier, before 1900, there was one old couple that lived in the old house by Post's mill. I remember him particularly because he came to Dad to get married. He married a younger gal, and he had a Civil War pension.

That old house by Post's was an interesting old house. It must have been a very old colonial house because I remember the old Dutch oven you could see there before it was torn down. It was a frame house just north of the entrance to the mill [on the west road]. I remember one family who lived over the line in South Monsey. There was a woman visiting there who was supposed to have magic powers as a healer. The women were in the kitchen and one woman scalded herself with a kettle of hot water. This woman, they say, healed it right up. That was when I was a little kid.

I remember when Billy Sunday was in Paterson. That made quite a stir. People went down, most at least once, mostly out of curiosity. It was quite a show. People wouldn't miss seeing Billy Sunday anymore than they'd miss the circus.

I remember Hop Yeomans vaguely, and, of course, I knew Bill Sr. very well. A gang of us used to go on fishing trips, Mr. Weiss and the boys and myself, and Bill and some of the other men. We'd go down to Sheepshead Bay to go fishing. That was quite an event to go to New York and take the subway out to Sheepshead Bay, get a boat and go fishing.

I remember going up to dinner in Monsey at John Jacob Hopper's. He was a brother of Herman Hopper's, son of John E. Hopper down on Lake Street. His wife's name was Ella. They had a daughter named Elizabeth. When John Jacob died, they moved to Spring Valley.

One recollection I have of this house here [the Demarest-Newman house] is that it was one of the few houses that had running water in it. Not upstairs, but in the kitchen. There was a spring back there in the field and it was just enough higher than the kitchen that they could have water there in the kitchen by gravity. That was a novelty. Nobody had water until Jacob Henry Hopper got his ram going.

It's surprising how many people had springs. For years Messengers got their water out of a spring. There was an old chestnut tree right alongside the road and right at the foot of that tree was a nice little spring. I never heard of any problems with contamination, yet those springs got awful dirty sometimes. They would go to the spring of the Messenger house with buckets to get water for the church. There was no well at the church then. After people came out here from the city for the summer, there got to be a few who commuted. Connolly used to commute to New York in the summer [lived where Penner's Lake was at New York border], then Curtin did [Creative Gardens house], and then Keidel who lived first on the hill across from Curtain. Other than that, people didn't have much to do with New York. It was a big event to go to New York.

The farmers took their produce to Paterson. A few took it down to New York, but that was a long haul. There would be quite a string of farm wagons going down the road in the late afternoon and evening because the people from around here, Monsey and up Viola way, they would all come down this road going to the Paterson market. New City in Rockland

was just a small place. Way back in the early days, people used the Hudson River to get their produce to the New York City market, but in my day Paterson was the big city market. There were all the big shops, too, for the women who needed to go shopping.

We had rural mail delivery after about 1908 or so, and that was how the papers were delivered too. Before that the post office was at DeBaun's store [the little building east of the Saddle River Market]. People didn't get too many papers, The Ramsey Journal and one in Suffern, the Suffern Reporter. Those were the two main local newspapers. Some people subscribed to out of town papers, but not many. They didn't pay much attention to things like that. They were pretty much self-sufficient. This was say back between 1905 and 1912. After 1912, things began to change a lot. The war changed a lot too, the whole community changed after that. Prior to that it was a peaceful little country valley. I say valley. Of course, Upper Saddle River takes in the ridge up where Carlough's live. That was quite a ways from here, so I never had too much contact up there. And those people were nearer Ramsey, so they were inclined to have their interests more in Ramsey. Although they lived in Upper Saddle River, they were never part of the Saddle River group quite as much. Ramsey was more of a town.

People did a lot of reading. A lot of magazines. Most people got quite a few magazines, Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, Saturday Evening Post.

I went to Hope College in Michigan. I had an uncle who was a professor there, so I went there for two and a half years. I always liked the east though. This was my home. I felt more at home here than I did out there. That was strictly a Dutch college town, very straight-laced. While I thought we were straight-laced here, it was much worse there. I got in a jam a couple of times by being a little too liberal. If you played cards there, you were liable to get expelled. And going to a dance was going straight to the devil. It was a coed school, and if you went with town girls, it was considered like going with a bunch of trash. And some of them were swell girls. People were very narrow in those days. There wasn't much drinking either.

I often think about what it was like back then. Drinking was frowned on. We had a few people here who were known as the town drunks. They'd get rip roaring drunk on Saturday night. One was John Walthery who used to have a blacksmith shop over on Church Road. He'd get roaring drunk and stagger down the road, and quite often on Saturday night, he'd get my father up and ask him to pray for him, he was so remorseful. But then a couple of weeks later, he'd do the same thing over again.

When prohibition came in, that was when we began to have stills in town. That was the height of when the town was deserted. There was nobody here. In the winter, if there was no snow on the roof of the barn, the revenuers would spot it. Curtin's barn had a still in it one winter. I suppose they rented it out. It was raided. And the old Townshend place (across from Knight's) had a still in it. They raided that and smashed it all up. The Hopper place across from us, they didn't have a still in the true sense of the word. They operated a French restaurant in New York and they made liquor, but I think mostly for their own use, their own customers. They had their own distilling setup, but they weren't very good operators because several times we heard explosions over there. The darn thing

had blown up. But they were never raided. There were stills scattered around the community in available barns.

There was very little business in town. Bill Yeomans' old sand pit was one of the few businesses, and then Anona Park. And the blacksmith shop. And there was a little business once up in the old Walthery blacksmith shop that made emblems or something. Walthery was earlier, about 1908-1910, and he wasn't there too long.

Talking about the old mills, if you went down the East Road, Terhune's place (Knight's) originally had a mill. I never saw it in operation. It had gone to pieces. But the mill pond was still there. Then further down there was the Abe Hopper mill, that was an operating saw mill when I was a kid. And then on Lake Street, John E. Hopper's place, there was a mill there, towards the West Road on the south side of Lake Street, right by the old bridge. There was a dam and they had a trench, a sluice going from the dam over to the mill pond at the foot of the hill. Most of the old families along the river had a mill at one time or another. Originally there was a mill down by the church here, the old dam part was still there when I was a kid. That's shown on one of the oldest maps and was one of the early mills. People had mills for their own use. They could saw their own lumber and firewood. And wood was a valuable thing.

Speaking of that, Jacob Henry Hopper (Kirschner home) and Mrs. Demarest (Nature's Creations) were brother and sister and old man Hopper gave them their homes. He owned a lot of land up the brook here (east of the East Road), and he wanted Jacob Henry to have an adequate supply of firewood so he gave Jacob Henry a right of way across the Demarest property. I often wonder if it's obsolete today. I know that later, when DePuy's were here, he still used that right of way through a narrow strip of land. He had access to that property up to the patch of woods.

Jacob Henry's father was Garrett Hopper. There were just the two children. When my folks came here, Garrett lived across the street from the parsonage. I never knew him. He died before I was born.

Up the brook above the Demarest property were the sandstone banks. That's where the sandstone for the Old Stone Church came from. There were a lot of sandstone ledges up there.

I can't tell you what a beautiful place this was around the turn of the century, just a beautiful valley with comfortable homes and comfortable people. In those days it was uncluttered with lush fields. I remember sitting here at the Demarest house and looking out over the meadow, the brook and the fields. Pastures everywhere. Just peaceful, restful country.