

**Cornelius Berdan**  
1893-1978

**Interviewed by Joan Rehain Fabris**  
**July 1, 1975**

*Cornelius Berdan grew up on a farm on West Saddle River Road located where Cavallini School is today. He was born about 1893. The town bought his farm in the 1960s to build Cavallini and Mr. Berdan moved to Hawthorne.*

Joan: Mr. Berdan, when did you first come to Upper Saddle River? What was it like?

Cornelius: I first came to Upper Saddle River in 1898 and I left there in 1961, a period of 63 years. My father chose the occupation of farmer. There were no local jobs available, only seasonal work on local farms.

There was no housing shortage. Everyone owned his or her own home. Our house was a two-story frame house. The schoolhouse was a one-room frame building and served up to the eighth grade. One teacher taught all eight grades.

Police were under the marshal system. One officer served the town. There was no fire department or ambulance corps. The nearest hospital was in Paterson and the nearest doctor was in Ramsey. Transportation was by horse and wagon. Mail was obtained at the lower Saddle River post office. The RFD route from Allendale was started in 1905. There was no telephone or electricity. The town newspaper was the Ramsey Journal.

Three mills were in operation: J.H. Hopper sawmill, Abram A. Hopper sawmill, and W. T. Post gristmill. There was one blacksmith shop on Church Road.

Joan: How old were you when you first moved here?

Cornelius: 5 years old.

Joan: How about neighbors? Did you have any?

Cornelius: Oh, yeah, we had neighbors on both sides, same as now. A family by the name of Wendt [sp? Frederick 1910, Vetter 1920] lived in the Parker place [Board of Education building], and the Terhune family lived in Bindschaedler's place [across from police station]. Alan Johnstone's grandfather, Edgar Terhune, lived in the house where he lives now [just north of the Board of Ed building]. Mr. Johnstone's mother was born in the Ackerson house, where the Butscher family lived before Erna Ackerson. [Edgar Terhune's wife was a DeBaun. She was born in that house so she probably went home to have her baby].

My father sold his farm produce at the Paterson market. It was the only market available then. We would leave by horse and wagon around midnight because it was a three-hour drive to Paterson and the market opened early.

Joan: What would a typical day have been like for a farmer?

Cornelius: We would get up about 6 a.m. or 5 a.m. We would start our chores right away. We had a hand dug well. There were not any nearby stores in those days. Food was delivered by a grocer who came around twice a week with groceries. He had staples but not fresh fruit or vegetables. The butcher wagon came once a week. One grocery man came from Monsey, and another, DeBaun, came from lower Saddle River. And there used to be a fish man who came from Paterson once a week.

We kept food in the cellar. A lot of meat was salted down and kept there too. It would keep until middle of the summer. But the butcher wagon came around and we bought from him too. He came once a week.

Being a bachelor I did my own laundry with tub and washboard. I did it the hard way.

You asked about slaves. I remember one descendent of slaves in Upper Saddle River. He worked for Abram A. Hopper over on the East Road. His father and mother had been slaves. He worked for A.A. Hopper whose house was where Jan River Drive was. It burned down. I owned that property at one time.

Joan: Where did you go to school as a boy?

Cornelius: The same one you did. I went to the one room school. My first teacher was Mr. Ware. We always called him Dominie Ware because he was a preacher too. There was no high school. They did not even send them to Ramsey then. Eighth grade was the end. Other teachers were Mrs. Westletorn [or Wesley Torn], Miss Fulper, Miss Meyers, Miss Johnstone. Miss Ivers, who came from Allendale, was my last teacher. They did not send students to Ramsey when I was there.

The police department was just one marshal. William T. Post was marshal when I was young. He ran the gristmill.

Joan: What happened when there was a fire?

Cornelius: You just let it burn. What else could you do? In later years they got together with lower Saddle River and paid them so much a year for their fire department to take care of fires. Before that there was nothing you could do.

Joan: Do you remember gypsies?

Cornelius: Sure, I remember them well. I never had anything to do with them. They used to migrate in the spring and the fall, just the same as the birds. They worked north in the spring and moved south in the fall. They went clean down to Virginia and stayed until the weather was mild again up here. I never had any contact with them. But I saw maybe 15-20 wagons go up the East Road. They always had horses; you know they were horse traders. And they always used to stop

to put up for the night just south of the Stone Church bridge. And they always had lots of kids, dogs and horses. A lot of them gypsies had money too. They were not as poor as you would think. They owned property in New York City, you know. After the automobiles came in, that put the gypsies off the road. You never saw them much after that. They did have cars, Packard cars.

Joan: Mrs. Hopper said that Mr. Hopper had a dealing with a gypsy once. He bought a horse and when he went to hitch the horse to the wagon, the horse kicked the wagon all to pieces.

Cornelius: The Ramsey Journal went back to about 1893. But most everything came from Paterson. Even the nearest bank was all the way to Paterson.

Transportation was mainly horse and wagon. There was a bus route that went through Saddle River but it went out of business. It didn't pay. It went from Paterson to Spring Valley.

Joan: How big were your school classes?

Cornelius: Maybe 40-45 in the whole school at the most. And one teacher for all.

Joan: How did you light your house?

There was no electricity. We had kerosene lamps. We cooked on a wood-burning stove in the kitchen, and in the sitting room we had a coal stove. [like a pot bellied stove].

The mail came through the Saddle River Post Office. You had to go down and get it. When the RFD started it came through Allendale.

The nearest doctor was in Ramsey, Dr. Deyoe. The nearest dentist was in Paterson or Suffern. The nearest hospital was in Paterson, Paterson General or St. Joseph's.

Joan: What about activities, dances or organizations?

Cornelius: Not too many dances or entertainments.

Joan: Tell me about the mills.

Cornelius: Jacob Henry Hopper's mill was right north of the Old Stone Church on the right hand side of the bridge, north of the church parsonage. Abram A. Hopper's sawmill was on the property that I owned later, just south of Meshirer's [Creative Gardens]. Down along the brook. And Post's mill was where the Yeomans live, a gristmill. There were a lot of other mills but that was before my time. You can go along the brook and see the remains; I think I counted seven or eight one time. There was a mill before my time behind Kish's, (McGonegal's), a gristmill. The power for the mill was way up by Hopper's, the pond, and then they led the water down through that long raceway. [Kish's was across from Parkers down in the gulch]. The blacksmith was where Beck's lived on Church Road [Tuthill's house, torn down in the 1990s], and then there

was another one, but there was only one at a time, on the hill up by Stark's [across the street from Tuthill's], but that one didn't last very long.

Joan: How has the town changed?

Cornelius: It's changed from rural country to village. The old Borough Hall was right across the street from the Little Green Schoolhouse. The ambulance corps used it for a while. There was another school for a while, across from the Old Stone Church on Church Road west of the cemetery. I remember seeing the foundation, it was west of the cemetery next to the brook. On the other side of the brook was the old Hopper property. It was way before my time.

Joan: Do you remember any stills in USR?

Cornelius: Oh sure, plenty. There were a lot during prohibition.

If you want some history of the school property, I have a search that dates back to 1640 or so. James D. Carlough was our first mayor. He was Lizzie's father. It was mostly Democrats back then, 90%.

Joan: What would you like to have seen stay the same?

Cornelius: Taxes. My father paid \$25 a year on 32 acres. In 1898 and the early 1900s. It didn't go up every year.

The only thing I knew about the slave cemetery, the one on Meshirer's property, was that the last burial was July 4, 1854. There was a cemetery up around the Chimney Ridge area but no one knew who it was, whether it was slaves or a farm family or who and now they have bull-dozed it over. I remember seeing the stones there. John Kroner told me they bull dozed them over.

Joan: Do you remember when Elmer's Store started?

Cornelius: Oh, not too long ago. I remember when Paterson had the store. Before that it was Taylor's [gas pumps] and before them it was Duryea's (Durie). He was a farmer. A family by the name of Cramer [Kramer] owned the Dykstra property (Mettowee).

Joan: I wanted to ask you about your artifact collection. How many did you find in Upper Saddle River?

Cornelius: I found quite a few along the river but most of my collection I found in Mahwah and New York State and elsewhere.