Jim Wells is truly a member of the Greatest Generation. He was a Great Neck Estates resident from 1925 until 1947, when he married and moved to 10 Welwyn Rd, Great Neck Plaza. He eventually left Great Neck but continued to work there until 1970. He permanently moved to Florida in 1993. He is now 93 years young.

Jim agreed to provide us with his recollections of Great Neck and was pleased to respond to questions on a variety of subjects from several people. The questions are numbered; the responses are entirely his words.

He would be happy to expand on any questions anyone might have resulting from his keen memories of Great Neck.

1. We assume you were in school in the 1930s. What was it like? What was it like for your parents? What did they do for a living? Were they affected by the Depression? Did friends move away?

Great Neck Schools were wonderful. Safe, no racial or religious incidents – everyone got along. I was in Kensington until 1936 and we had some incredibly wealthy children and some dirt poor kids sitting side by side next to each other in the same classroom. Quite a few kids’ parents were in or affiliated with show business. As far as we were concerned we were all “just kids.” Miss Johnson, our principal, opened every assembly with a reading from the Book of Psalms and no one ever raised an issue over it. Maybe that’s why all the kids were well behaved in school. My Dad owned and operated a Fuel Oil and other petroleum distribution businesses on East Shore Rd, so my family had deep roots in the community and our family seemed to know “everybody.” I grew up in Great Neck Estates where we had the old Soundview Golf Course and were adjacent to Mrs. Eldridge’s farm so there was lots of open space to play.

Our home on Ridge Road in Great Neck Estates was built immediately after World War I, possibly 1920. A builder who was concurrently building the Lido Hotel on the South Shore built it for himself. It has many extras including four working fireplaces – 2 downstairs and 2 upstairs. Pretty cool having a fireplace in your bedroom! My parents were the third owners, purchasing it, I believe, in 1926. It continues to have the same configuration, and contains fond memories for me as the only house I ever knew as a child – indeed until I married and moved out. Immediately to the left of our house was a home owned by the Brown family, the oldest daughter of which subsequently became famous as the author of childrens’ books, the most notable one being “Good Night Moon” which was ultimately translated into and published in many languages. Her name was Margaret Wise Brown.

The Jayson Avenue houses on the south side of Northern Boulevard were quite different from those on the north, as I recall. Some of the ones on the north were built by the Crampton Family Construction Company. Those streets running south perpendicular off Northern Boulevard such as Jayson Avenue were all simply numbered streets such as “255th St.” until sometime in the early 1960s, when they were renamed by the Town of North Hempstead.

The Depression hit many of my friends’ families hard, although I was too young to understand why.

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All I knew was that, for example, friend “A” who “last year” lived in Kings Point, “this year” lived in an

apartment – often Great Neck Towers or similar, all of which meant little to me other than we now played

at a different address. My older brother graduated from Great Neck High School in 1937 and along with several of his classmates enrolled in a new little college called “Hofstra” in Hempstead which at that time was a branch of NYU. He graduated from Hofstra in 1941. I graduated high school in 1942, and for some mysterious reason was admitted to Princeton along with 3 other Great Neck students. After freshman year I found myself in the Marines, returning to college after the war. My brother went into the Army right after Pearl Harbor. I would guess that almost every male graduate around my brother’s and my times served in the Armed Forces.

Great Neck was a small cluster of retail shops when I was young. If one wanted a major department store such as Macy’s, A & S, etc. one went to NYC, Hempstead or Jamaica. My parents largely bought clothing, sporting equipment, bicycles, etc. from stores on Middle Neck Rd., which was the only commercial/retail street in Great Neck. There were stores of slightly less quality on Northern Boulevard in Little Neck, but most of us patronized Nineslings’ “Department Store” (two stories high – big deal), Thurston’s Bicycle Store, Nassau Bootery, etc. where our parents knew the owners, and we went to school with their children. And, of course, everyone used one of the two Gilliar Drug Stores – they were the only places to get prescriptions filled.

1. What about news from Europe and the rise of Nazism? Was that something that families here were talking about? Did any attempt to take in family or refugees?

The gathering clouds of war presented an interesting look at history in the making for all of us in school during the ‘30s and early ‘40s. My first personal experience with a war refugee was in 1937 when I was in 7th grade and we received in Junior High School an escapee/refugee from Spain due to the Spanish Civil War. He was slow to learn English, but fortunately we had one teacher, a Mrs. Matthews who was fluent in Spanish and she coached him through his first year of school. We had one Japanese family living on Cedar Drive in Great Neck Estates, and although Pearl Harbor was a long way off, he had some serious problems from time to time when he espoused a pro-Japanese position regarding what the Japanese Army was doing in China in the late 1930s. Sympathies were heavily on the side of the Chinese. Around 1939 and 1940 was when the trickle of Jewish refugees started to appear – all of whom seemed to be from well-educated families, spoke English extremely well, and assimilated easily, the boys going out for various sports and the girls participating mostly in music and drama. They were all delightful, but said little (at least to non-Jews) about what they might have seen or learned in Germany. Again, Great Neck was a welcoming and friendly spot, and as far as us school kids felt, they were just classmates who were bi-lingual. There were a few instances where a refugee Jewish school child would simply move in with and become a part of an established Jewish Great Neck family, but largely with the first wave of Nazi refugees, they arrived as a family, purchasing or renting a home. Another aspect of the approaching war situation centered around the large Polish and Italian population living in Great Neck. They continued to get news from their homeland which they would share with us. I recall one Italian classmate telling me (I assume truthfully) that there was a modest attempt by the Italian Government or supporters to recruit able-bodied young Italian-Americans for the Italian Army which was not faring well in Greece and North Africa at that time.

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1. Did you have siblings drafted into WWII? Where did men from Great Neck go to sign up for the draft?

Neither my brother nor I were drafted into World War II, we both enlisted. Brother Jack was 7 years older than I and the Selective Service Act (draft) was passed in October 1940, when I was a Junior in High School and my brother was a Senior in College. The Act required all men age 21 to 35 to register with their local draft boards, and as needed, they would be called up for physicals and assigned a draft category (1-A, etc, depending on physical condition and their possible exemption – such a college student, critical employment and the like). I was not yet eligible for the draft, and wouldn’t be until freshman year of college. My brother and all his peers had to register immediately, and depending on their draft category, were immediately drafted or deferred. Each community had its own draft board made up on local citizens and they assigned fellows to their draft category and called them to be inducted into the Army as needed. I believe the Great Neck Draft Board met in the Kensington Village Hall and I seem to recall that Mayor Oatley was the Chairman of the Great Neck Board. My brother registered in 1940 as required and was deferred initially as a college student; he subsequently received a second deferment due to poor eyesight. Right after Pearl Harbor he enlisted at Fort Totten (Bayside) and was ultimately sent to Officers Candidates School and eventually packed off to England in the summer of 1942. Within the first few months of entering college, I enlisted in one of the several available college reserve programs (I selected the Marine Corps program), and after being deferred for a few semesters, was shipped off to Marine Boot Camp, thence to Officers Training at Quantico. As a side note I remained in the Marine Corps Reserves, serving in World War II, released to inactive duty in late 1945, recalled for the Korean War, released again and remained in the reserves until 1976, retiring with the rank of Colonel.

Many of my peers who graduated from Great Neck High School entered college, following the same general route and many emerged as Officers in the Army, Navy or Marines. A few went to the newly opened Kings Point Merchant Marine Academy and a very small percentage waited to be called by the draft. At the end of World War II, my brother transferred to the regular Army, remaining as a career officer. As you probably know from the old Great Neck Memorial, there were quite a few young men from our community KIA (Killed in Action) during both World War II and the Korean War. One family, who lived in the Lakeville area, had two sons in High School with me – one a year ahead and the other two years behind me. One was killed in World War II and the other in Korea. A real tragedy. In 1946, the youth population swelled rapidly as the now “veterans” returned home with most of us exercising the new “GI Bill” to return to or start college.

1. People are always talking about how Great Neck “isn’t what it used to be” – but you lived through successive waves of change, particularly after World War II, when they built the Baker Hill homes and other homes to cater to returning Veterans. Was the change so radically obvious in those years in Great Neck?

As to the post-war development of Great Neck, in my recollection it was all quite gradual and the first relatively large scale development with which I was familiar was the sale of the old Soundview Golf Course in Great Neck Estates which was bounded by Bayview Avenue to Little Neck Bay and from Saddle Rock to Amherst Road. Having grown up on Ridge Drive in Great Neck Estates with my backyard bordering on the first fairway of the golf course, I was saddened to see it go for housing

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construction. I believe shortly after that development, the Saddle Rock development north of Harbor Hills was started. The rest of Great Neck development was pretty much piece meal with the Baker Hill development and houses along Wooleys Lane being the only major exceptions. The Baker Hill development was a bit unusual, but as I recall, it was the first of the “slab” type houses to be constructed in Great Neck. Most of the development in Kings Point was to my recollection done on a piece meal basis, as one after the other of the large estates or properties were sold and re-platted to accommodate several homes to be constructed on the properties. The real controversial building expansion was the apartments in or near Great Neck Plaza which completely changed the character of the community forever. I worked in Great Neck from 1945 to 1970 and recall the controversies as there were numerous protest meetings attempting to prevent the tearing down of old homes along and to the North of Grace Avenue, alas all to no avail. You raise an important point in your question when you talk about the post war development being for the returning Veterans. I would opine that Great Neck development was far too pricey for returning veterans and most of my high school classmates returning from World War II service were forced to look out in Levittown, Hicksville, East Meadow and the like for a home. I was able to secure an apartment on Welwyn Road in which I lived for seven years and after looking for an “affordable home” for several years, finally moved to Port Washington, as I couldn’t find anything I could afford. Great Neck’s postwar building boom was certainly not designed with the returning veterans in mind.

1. What was the reaction of students and the community to the construction of a second high school down south in 1957?

As to the residents and students reactions to Great Neck South Senior High School, I have no personal memories other than I believe the reaction was favorable, because the original high school had become severely crowded.

1. What was the reaction of the community to the construction of Sol Atlas’ shopping center down south in the station area in 1951?

I am familiar with the community reaction to Sol Atlas’ (who by the way was a personal friend of mine, although he was a about a dozen years or more older than I). I was living on Welwyn Road then, and my parents were still in Great Neck Estates. My Wife and my Mother both enjoyed shopping there as it was initially filled with upscale shops, and I believe the anchor store was John Wanamaker – decidedly upscale. My Mother in particular loved the Horn and Hardart retail store where one could buy all sorts of frozen gourmet food.

1. North Shore Hospital on Community Drive (or Valley Road as it was once called) opened in 1951. Before that time were residents concerned about the lack of a hospital? What medical facilities were available before that?

Regarding the North Shore Hospital, I was quite involved in the planning stages of that facility. My family doctor was on the initial board, and I was selected to be in the first “Junior Board” which would be sort of an advisory board to the formal/legal Board, and from which they might have a pool of relatively young person’s to move up to the real Board. In my recollection there was almost 100%

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favorability for the creation of the Hospital, especially since Jock Whitney was donating the land. There was a huge demand for a local hospital somewhere, because the nearest existing hospital in the late 1940s was Nassau Hospital in Mineola. My first two children were born in Nassau Hospital and I recall that when our first son was born in November 1947 my wife’s bed was out in the hallway for about 24 hours until space opened up in a 2-bed room. Shortly after that, Nassau Hospital expanded but it still couldn’t keep up with the demand. So there was great enthusiasm for a hospital somewhere in the Great Neck and Manhasset area. Also, St. Francis Hospital did not begin to expand until much later. The “Valley Road” area was a real dump until the hospital was built, and I remember my (very) old friend Nick Schneider still maintained his blacksmith shop there – shows how modern the valley area “was.” As a final note, my daughter was born in the North Shore Hospital in 1959, when it was still a relatively small (2 story, L shape) facility.

1. Was your family involved with the Wells Oil Company on East Shore Rd.? Was a fellow named Jack O’Brien an employee of Wells Oil Co.?

My Dad started the Wells Fuel Oil and Gasoline Company in 1926 with one Buddy DeSilva as his backer and partner. Buddy at the time was a famed songwriter (he wrote most of the Al Jolson songs – “California Here I Come” and many others) and was also a Broadway producer. The reason he and my dad were friendly is because Buddy’s wife Marie, and my Mom were close friends and roommates in the old Ziegfeld Follies ca. 1910 or so! Somewhere around the house I have a photo of my Dad and Buddy posing at the East Shore Road terminal with Buddy wearing a very stylish Raccoon Skin overcoat. Jack O’Brien, who lived for years on Jayson Avenue, went to work for my Dad in the late 1920s, and retired around 1966, and subsequently went to work part time for the Great Neck Park District at Cutter Mill Park at the corner of Jayson Avenue and Great Neck Rd. I remember their daughter Pat from when she was a baby. The last time I spoke with her is when she called me to tell me of her Dad’s death. (Editor’s note: The Zamchick family, whose son Alan transcribed Jim’s memories here - lived at 39 Jayson Avenue, from 1962 until 2009, and the O’Brien’s were their neighbors at 37 Jayson).

I had worked for the Wells Oil Company part time when I was in High School, and went to work there full time when I was released from the Marine Corps at the end of 1945. I became President of the firm as my Dad became ill in the early 1960s. Receiving the proverbial “offer I couldn’t refuse,” I sold the firm in 1969. I subsequently became Nassau County Commissioner of Commerce where as part of my concern was the opening and subsequent management of the Nassau Coliseum. Lots of memories.

1. Can you share any memories about the area around Cutter Mill Park or the area south of Lakeville School?

Regarding the small parks near Cutter Mill Rd, Jayson Ave., etc. I don’t have the specifics, but during the time I was a Town of North Hempstead Councilman (1960-1969) the Great Neck Park District, which needed to have major acquisitions approved by the Town, was being urged by the local Great Neck population to acquire several little parcels of land and turn them into what was referred to then as “Passive Parks,” i.e. just a green space where folks could sit and relax. One such park was in the area south of Lakeville School almost to the old I. U. Willets Rd. It was quite small (editor note: Jim is referring to today’s Upland Park), but eventually was turned into a very attractive passive park.

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The park at the north end of Jayson Avenue, was basically that type of Park (Cutter Mill Park), although some activities were later added. Regarding some of the area even further south in Lake Success, there was the old Schumacher Farm parcel at the southwest corner of Lakeville Rd. and Marcus Ave. (immediately south of the Northern State Parkway), which was an active farm until acquired by the hospital. Also in the Marcus Avenue area, where the old Sperry Property was (also where the United Nations Headquarters was) was a large empty parcel where as a youngster, our Boy Scouts used to go camping in the woods. Immediately north of Lakeville Road (a little south of the area where the Great Neck School District acquired property for its administration offices) (Ed. Note: Which we now know as the Phipps Building on the grounds of Great Neck South) was the toll house for the original Vanderbilt Motor Parkway – about which numerous historical books have been written. (Ed note: the toll house was absorbed completely and unrecognizably when a house was built on its site in the ‘80s).

One of the first and possibly most successful developers of residential property in the Lake Success area was the Newell and Daniel development on the West side of Lakeville Rd., across from the (Ed. Fresh Meadows) golf course which extended almost to I.U. Willets Rd. I believe Roy Newell and Porter Daniel might have built some of their houses there pre-WWII, but finished up their development after the War.

1. Do you have any memories of the Cornell Farm that was located in the uplands area between today’s IU Willets and Bates Rd.? Did you yourself have any experiences and thoughts of the Public Bathing Beach at the end of Steamboat Rd.? How about the land in and around the Chrysler Mansion or the clearing of Kings Point Park from the swamp to becoming the top prk it is today? Do you have any memories of the Great Neck Indoor Ice Skating Rink that was on Cutter Mill Rd. near the Bayview Ave. intersection?

I have lots of memories of the rink. It was right up alongside of Cutter Mill Rd. surrounded by a parking lot. I believe it was constructed a year or two before 1940, because I vividly recall skating there with my best sophomore year girlfriend in 1940. That was a great gathering place for us Great Neck High School kids in those days; there would always be a gang of us there on the weekends. There was also a pretty good Great Neck hockey team (not affiliated with the school) which used to practice and play games there. Several high school kids and alumni played on the team.

Going back to the earlier question, the name “Cornell Farm” rings a most distinct bell in my deepest memory, but I can’t for the life of me recall in what context. Possibly someday I’ll recall why the name keeps jarring my memory but for now I’ll have to pass on any information concerning the farm. I remember Ted (I think that was his first name) Bates as being Great Neck’s first World War II casualty. I believe he was a Great Neck High School grad, but several years ahead of me. I only recall one member of my Great Neck High School class (Dennis Charlton) being KIA in World War II, but there may have been more, as most of us served in the armed forces at that time.

As to the beach at the end of Steamboat Road, I have scant recollection, other than when I was quite young, it was simply a dock extending out into the Long Island Sound plus an area for picnicking, sunbathing, or whatever. I don’t recall when they started to improve the area into a real park, but the substantial upgrades as I recall didn’t occur until post WWII (we determined Jim’s recollections here were of the development of Steppingstone Park, just north of Elm Point). I remember when the Chrysler

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and Barstow Estates were just that – residences for the owners. There was also a more modernistic residence in the same area which was Chrysler Junior’s home (we agreed later that this is the current bath and playhouse, at Steppingstone, built on the Olga Petrova estate property, originally “a white stucco building the architecture of which I recall looked like boxes piled on each other.”). It definitely did NOT become part of the USMMA. By the time work started on the creation of the Academy, most private construction had been halted due to the start of the War. It’s for that reason I tend to believe that no meaningful improvements were made to what later became the Steppingstone Park, until post-War. One personal recollection about the Steamboat Road dock, is my maternal grandmother whose family were strictly Manhattan residents, used to tell me stories about what a great weekend outing it was to take a party steamboat from some Manhattan dock on the East River out to the “Steamboat Dock” in Great Neck where they would picnic on the shore. Since that particular grandmother was born in 1853, the time of these steamboat excursions could have been anywhere around the last quarter of the 1800’s.

Similar to the public bathing facility on Steamboat Road, Great Neck Estates also had a dock extending out in Little Neck Bay in the 1930s. However, it was constructed primarily for rowboats used as tenders for boat owners who docked their boats offshore in deeper waters. Regardless of its intended purpose, as kids we didn’t hesitate to use it as a swimming dock. The Great Neck Sea Scouts (a branch of the Boy Scouts) also used the Great Neck Estates dock to keep their own powerboat docked there. Later on, perhaps in the late 1930s, the Estates were able to raise enough money to build a sort of “pavilion” with restrooms, and one tennis court. The “Park Staff” consisted of old Mr. Pelcher who ran the park like it was his own personal property, and woe betide any youngster who did damage or misbehaved. He had one assistant who maintained the property, the lone tennis court, and the one park building in proper shape. After the War, the Great Neck Estates citizens circulated petitions to commence construction of a swimming pool. I got married in January 1947, and moved away from Great Neck Estates, but the Village gradually made my old rickety dock into a first class park. I think that was sort of the same gradual path that the Steppingstone Park took under the guidance of the Great Neck Park District. As to the Kings Point Park, when I was quite young, it was generally referred to as the “Bird Sanctuary,” as it had little or no facilities – it was simply a place where one went and enjoyed nature. Later on in the mid to late 1930s, they built some very nice picnic areas there with fireplaces, grills, etc. and one could reserve an area for a picnic, outing or whatever. I don’t recall the Kings Point Park as being a swamp area or that it had to be drained, or perhaps I’m thinking of a different area. I’m speaking of the heavily wooded area sort of North (sic, actually south) of Red Brook Rd. and West (sic, actually east) of Kings Point Rd. In those days there were relatively few houses in the area – mostly large estates over near the water or large homes up in the Kennilworth area.

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