



Soup Spy, Tea Acolyte

My Hoboken Summer Jobs

Recollections of Carol Ann Wilson

A
Project of
the Hoboken
Historical Museum
and the
Friends of the
Hoboken Public Library



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Tea Acolyte

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The Hoboken Oral History Project

Vanishing Hoboken
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For more information or to become a member of HHM or FHPL and receive copies of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks, contact: Hoboken Historical Museum, PO Box 3296 (1301 Hudson Street), Hoboken, NJ 07030; Friends of the Hoboken Public Library, 500 Park Avenue, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

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Contemporary photograph of Carol Ann Wilson, ©2005 Jean-Paul Picard, photographer. All other images from the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum unless otherwise noted.



Periodically, when we came to work, we were told not to wear our uniforms. We would get a list and we would have to go to the local supermarkets and buy competitors' soup and bring it back. They would taste it. So we were the spies.

The big moment, though, would come when the tea taster came. He would pull up on the pier there—he would come in a yacht—and the whole room was cleared. We were like little acolytes; we got to hold the beakers, to serve him the different blends of tea.

—CAROL ANN WILSON
JANUARY 22, 2001



Carol Ann Wilson in front of the former Lipton Tea factory, now luxury housing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEAN-PAUL PICARD

Introduction

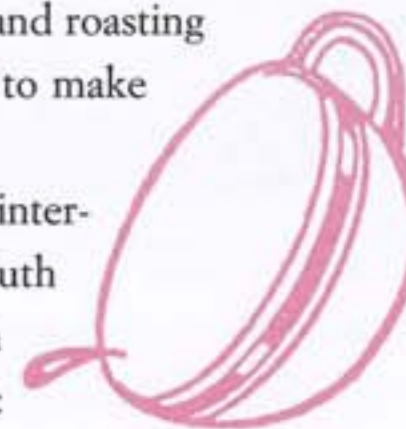
Carol Ann Wilson

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Carol Ann Wilson, like many local teenagers, sought summer employment in one of the thriving industries then doing business in Hoboken. She found jobs at Lipton Tea (15th Street) and General Foods (Maxwell House factory, 11th and Hudson Streets).

The Lipton Tea building, built in 1893, was the company's first American warehouse and headquarters. Ships bearing tea from overseas plantations originally docked next to the factory, where workers packaged it for consumers. In 1962, Lipton moved to Englewood Cliffs; the Tea Building was converted to luxury apartments in 2000-2001.

Maxwell House, too, relocated, dismantling its Hoboken coffee plant and its giant neon coffee cup sign in 1993. The original 1939 plant, once the largest coffee blending and roasting plant in the world, was demolished in 2004 to make way for a luxury housing development.

This chapbook contains quotes from an interview with Ms. Wilson, conducted by Ruth Charnes, on January 22, 2001. Ms. Wilson is a member of a Hoboken family of longstanding:



her Norwegian ancestors arrived in Hoboken in the 1860s, and her Irish forebears journeyed here in the 1880s. At the time of the interview, Ms. Wilson, a psychologist by training, was Director of Health and Human services for the County of Hudson. She has been involved with the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library for many years and is on the adjunct faculty at St. Peter's College.

Summer Jobs in Hoboken

It was like a big rite of passage, to have a summer job. Everybody took them. It usually happened at sixteen, between your sophomore and junior year, or your junior to senior year of high school. There were lots of companies in Hoboken at that time, so there were a lot of ways kids could get jobs.

In Hoboken, you had food corporations: General Foods Corporation, Lipton's. You had, down in the western section of the city, paper factories, box factories, Venetian blind factories, pencils, rattan furniture. It was considered almost a requirement in your passage to adulthood, that you would earn some money independently, whether you were economically in need or whether you had resources.

The young fellows from college would be home, delivering the mail during the Christmas holidays. You would have mail delivery

twice a day. Kids became the office

boys or they worked as janitors.

Of course, the girls always had a little bit more refined position;

they were always connected with an

office in some way. The girls would be getting jobs babysitting, or they worked the bakeries. That used to be a big thing. A lot of my friends would work in bakeries, because then we had tons of them.

LIPTON'S TEA
The World's Finest

They all have a story of how they learned a certain recipe. I never made it into the bakery. I never became the bakery lady, though I aspired to it.

At sixteen, you got your working papers. The fellows would work in the factories, where there were always lots of jobs for them, doing what we called "lower-level" jobs. I know in my house, my father used to say, "Learn to respect how people have to earn a living, so you'll know the advantages you're getting by going to school. But you will learn: as long as it's honest work, that's the most important thing." My father felt very strongly that he didn't want us to be arro-



Aerial photo of Standard Brands building (Lipton Tea), 15th and Washington Street, Hoboken, 1951. PHOTOGRAPH BY FAIRCHILD AERIAL SURVEYS, INC. COURTESY OF THE NEW JERSEY STATE ARCHIVES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.



gant about having an opportunity, and to ever think that we were better than anyone else.

Now there were certain restrictions you were going to have: you knew your parents weren't going to let you work anyplace at night, and I wasn't going to travel, because I didn't drive.

So it was going to be something within this mile-square window. You thought you were very independent but, basically, everybody knew everybody, and you really were in a protected environment.

So you would read the ads in the paper for summer help. We had two newspapers at that time. I remember taking the newspaper, with two of my friends, to go to the personnel departments and apply for positions.

During the school year, I didn't work, because that was [the time for] studies and activities. No, this was summer, and [the job] would be from the time school closed until just before Labor Day—or until your family went on vacation. They also accommodated that.

I went up to Lipton Tea. They had an ad they were running, a special project: "Youth can apply, sixteen and above." So I went up to the personnel department with two of my friends.

We went to apply.

They were located right here, where the apartments are now, that was the Lipton Tea Complex. They had a guard at the door, and you had your newspaper—you were going in to apply for that position—and you met every friend you ever knew. All were applying for these summer positions. We went in and first

they gave you a typing test. Well, I got through that one but I wasn't exactly a whiz, compared to some kids, who



were taking commercial courses in high school. I was in academics, so I was learning Latin—which really wasn't a marketable skill—and that wasn't going to get me a summer job.

But they also gave you another opportunity. They had this other kind of test: if you could taste things. You were blindfolded and they'd give you something. "Could you taste what was in this?" So I did that test, and I went through that one with flying colors! I liked this tasting test, and I kept saying, "Well, it can't be much of a job."

So I went home a little disappointed, because I just didn't think I racked up as well as my friends did. They certainly typed better than I did. Then I got a phone call to please report. Three of us went up, very excited. We were getting hired; we had to bring our working papers with us, and a note from our parents that we were able to work.

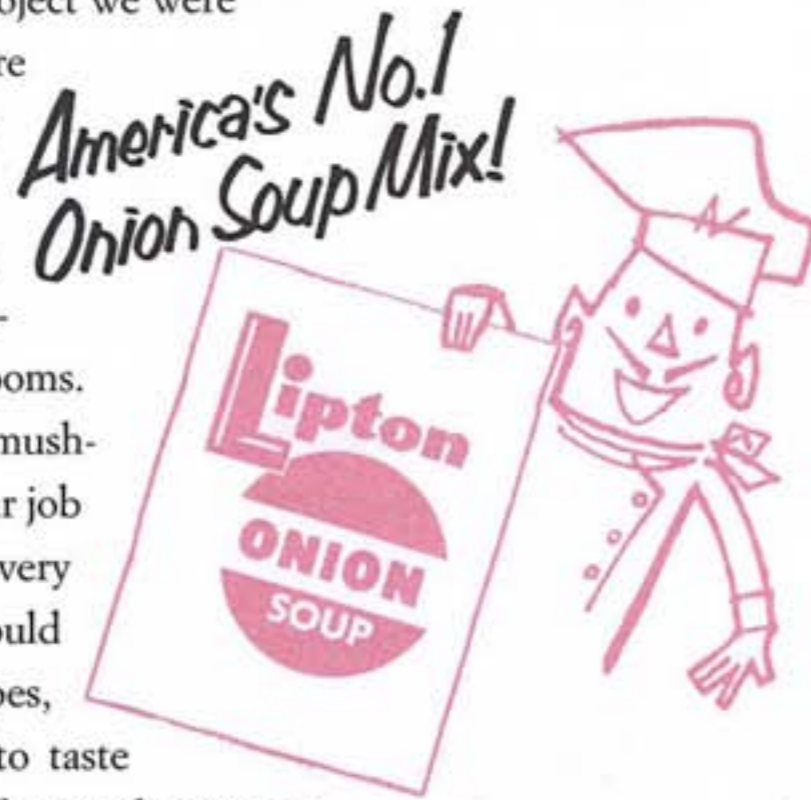
Soup Spy

So up we went, and my friends got jobs as messengers in offices. I didn't. I was sent "upstairs." I walked into this laboratory, and while I was there this gentleman came—Mr. Kean, who was the supervisor—and there were four people my age, two boys and another young lady. I was the only one from Hoboken. The other girl was from New York. The two fellas, one was from Long Island and the other was from another part of New Jersey.

We were told we were going to be put on this very special project. They were getting ready to do packaged soups. I think they had their chicken soup out, and a vegetable soup. They were working on this project, where they were getting a third soup out, and I was going to work on this *secret* project. We were not to discuss this *secret* project. We were all feeling very important!

It turned out that the project we were working on was they were developing a mushroom soup. The big thing was that we were [to be] tasting the consistency of mushrooms, dehydrated mushrooms. I kid you not. Until the mushrooms tasted "properly," our job was to taste these things every half hour or so. They would work up a batch of recipes, and we would then have to taste the mushrooms, rate them for toughness, tenderness, and flavor.

This was the job, and at that time they paid very, very good wages for this summer position. It was above minimum wage. At that time I was probably bringing home \$80 or \$90 a week, for a summer job, which really was very good. It was an unbelievable position. I think my friends who were messengers weren't bringing home the same amount of money.



The four of us sat around this table, with all these chemists and home economists. We had to change into white uniforms. We were in this kitchen setup, overlooking the Hudson—getting the whole look of the Hudson horizon—and we worked on this secret recipe they were doing on dehydrated mushrooms, to put them in mushroom soup.

Then, periodically, when we came to work, we were [told] not to wear our uniforms. We would get a list and we would have to go to the local supermarkets and buy competitors' soup and bring it back. They would taste it. So we were the spies. We felt this really was a great, great espionage job. Because at the time we had local A&Ps, and we had a Safeway. We had about five supermarkets, and we'd each have a section. We would go in and buy different soups. We'd report by eleven in the morning with our groceries. They could see what the competitors' products were and the prices. We were the little town spies on soup.

I worked on dehydrated mushrooms, and [later], Wishbone salad dressing. They were putting out two new salad dressings. I used to have to taste-test them. Two or three times a day they would work up recipes. Then we would have to come up and rate the salad dressings, the flavors.

Tea Breaks Along the Hudson

Lipton Tea had a ten in the morning tea break. Trolleys would come around, [pushed by] women in uniforms, with freshly baked pastries and tea. And because we were with all the chemists and the engineering department, we were included in these tea breaks. Meanwhile, our friends downstairs, on the second and fourth floors, were running themselves ragged, racing back and forth, delivering mail (there must

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CHICKEN RICE
The white meat chicken soup with prime long grain rice

and

MUSHROOM
Makes wonderful soup . . . sauces . . . and gravies, too!



have been at least fourteen stories to that building.) And here we were, having a tea break, with this freshly baked pastry. That would be in the morning. And you had a second tea break in the afternoon! In the afternoon it was between 2:30 and 3:00.

And then we had privileges for lunch—because once you were in the company you didn't leave, especially the young people. They didn't have you go out at lunchtime. I guess they considered it a safety factor, and they could keep an eye on us. But I had privileges with the dining room that the engineers all went to, and here were these four kids—we were literally kids next to them—and we had these dining room privileges.

Every day you were having lunch looking out on the Hudson, watching the ships come back and forth. I mean, it was a wonderful summer job, let me tell you. It was unbelievable. I thought this was the way the working world was. I figured the working world was really great!

We'd all meet going home, because you'd go down and change out of your uniform, and you would change into your civilian clothes. And all your friends who were working up there, along with you, would meet. They'd be talking about [how] their legs were tired from walking, and I really couldn't understand what was going on, because this was just the best job I ever had in my life. I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it.

Tea Acolyte

The big moment, though, would come when the tea taster came. He would pull up on the pier there—he would come in a yacht—he would come up, and the whole room was cleared. We were like lit-



tle acolytes; we got to hold the beakers, to serve him the different blends of tea. He would make sure of quality.

Whatever way Lipton tea was supposed to taste, he would be the one who gave the final approval.

I got to be the acolyte. I was allowed to be with the tea taster, which was considered this great big privilege. He had this long, plastic tube that had a loop in it. He would just sip. He had a basin (he would never swallow anything), and he would spit it out. It would be this great moment, everybody would be around, very tense. All the bosses would be there [waiting] until this tea taster made this great pronouncement. I used to be told how fortunate I was to be able to be part of this great ceremony.

The upshot of it was that, when I was finishing high school, my boss had called me, on my summer job, and they wanted to send me up to Cornell University, to major in home economics. If I was interested in doing it they would pick up the whole bill, with the guarantee that when I finished, at the end of four years, I would have a career with the Lipton Tea Company. Of course, I was going off somewhere else, and I was going into a whole other line. I was going to be majoring in psychology—which I later did—so I didn't appreciate it. I look back and say, "I could have been Betty Crocker."

They gave you wonderful opportunities, and it was a whole line of work that you just didn't know anything about. It was a world unto its own.

They had special tasting workshops



Lipton
Beef Flavor Noodle Soup
 Savory beef broth with lively country vegetables and new "ring noodles" that never get soggy.



Use it as an ingredient in the following recipes:

VEGETABLE SOUP
ITALIAN STYLE



- 1/2 cup diced carrots
- 1/4 cup sliced celery
- 1 diced tomato
- 1 cup shredded cabbage
- Pepper
- 6 cups boiling water
- 1 envelope Lipton Beef Flavor Noodle Soup Mix
- 1 envelope Lipton Onion Soup Mix
- 1/2 cup cooked baked beans, chick peas or kidney beans
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Cook vegetables in water, covered, for 20 minutes. Stir in pepper and soup mixes; cover and simmer 10 minutes. Add peas or beans and parsley, heat. Serve with grated cheese. Makes 6 servings.

down at Rutgers University at that time, even for wine. Because, I guess, Lipton Tea was just one part of a conglomerate that had all these different facets. [There were opportunities available] if you were one of these people they selected, because you had these taste buds. I guess, evidently, you had to have this gift of tasting. All they used to worry about was: "Don't get a cold!" The four of us who were



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in this project were treated like two little princes and two little princesses, because we could taste components.

[Between the tastings] we could read, study. The four of us being within a few years of each other, the girls flirted with the boys and the boys flirted with the girls—all very chaperoned, though. They were very, very protective of you. Toward the end of the season they would have overtime, because they would have special projects. Then

you would get almost double money. The young ladies, when we finished, if we worked until eight at night, which was considered very late for then, your supervisor escorted you home in a group. You got walked home. The fellas could go off, but they supervised the girls. They would walk in a group with their supervisor, and they were walked to the door of their home. Absolutely, positively.

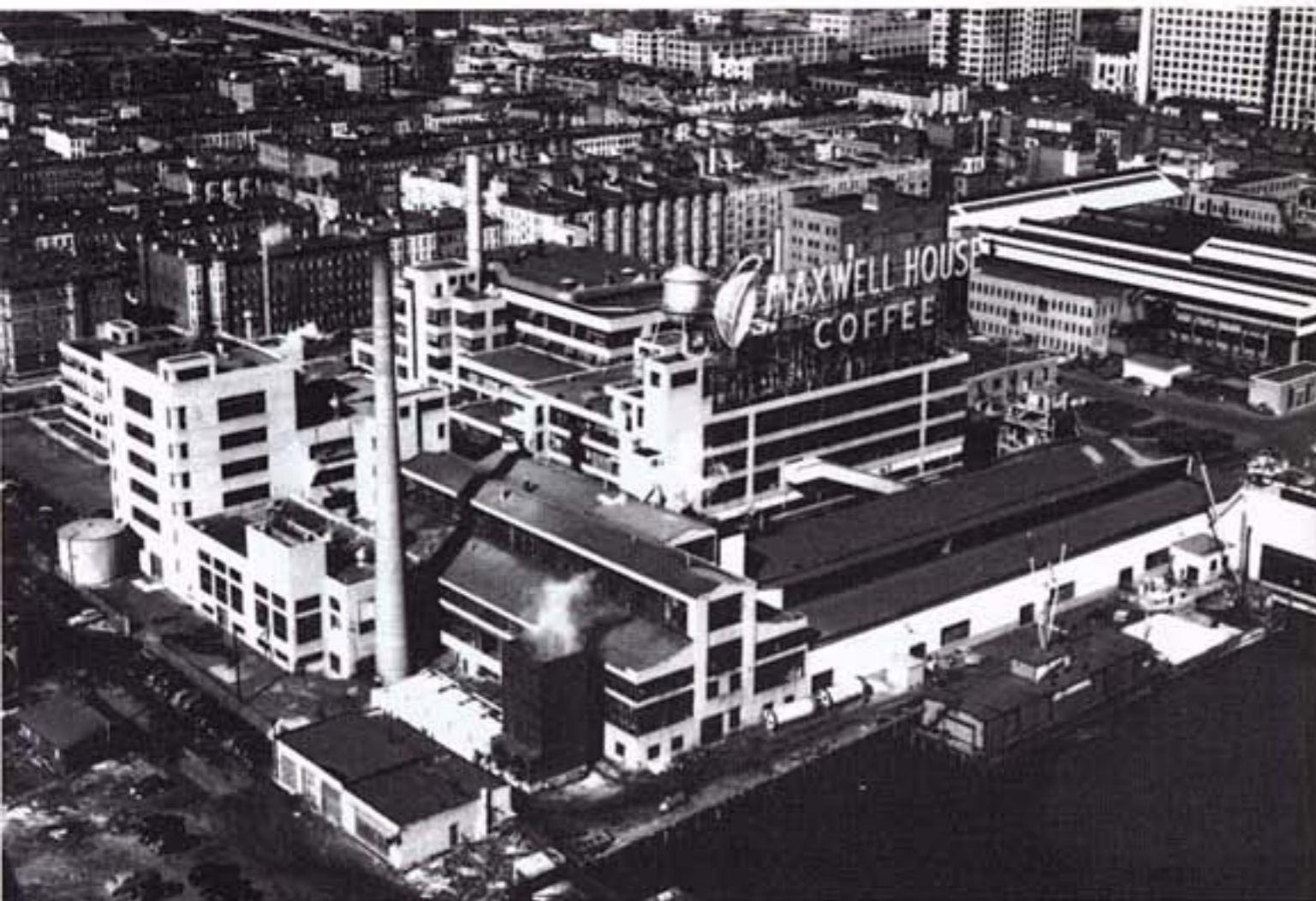
Last Stop, General Foods

I was with Lipton Tea from, I'd say, from age sixteen until the end of my freshman year in college. They moved the laboratory, at that time, out to Englewood Cliffs, and I was not old enough to drive. So what I did was I switched from Lipton Tea. They switched me over to General Foods Corporation, which was Maxwell House, and I worked in the laboratory there.

For that job I was in quality assurance, and the big emphasis in that laboratory was that every time they did a shipment of coffee, you had to go out randomly and select it from the lines, and check it for quality. There were six tests we had to give on every batch, and here you are, all of eighteen-going-on-nineteen years of age, having this great authority that if it didn't meet your standard, you could hold up the entire shipment. They would have the boxcars outside, to be packed and shipped out, and if you went out and waved this pink sheet of paper, you held up that shipment.

They would have to come back, and you'd get all these supervisors from the line running in, to find out what was wrong. Because, my goodness, the whole boxcar was not being done. Here I am, at nineteen, having all this power,





Aerial photo of Hoboken's Maxwell House Coffee plant, 1949, by Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc. COURTESY OF THE NEW JERSEY STATE ARCHIVES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

saying, "Sorry, you didn't meet the standards." You would [stop a shipment] if it came underweight, because it's a federal regulation.

It was an interesting group that they had working in summer jobs, there. We were accepted because we were in school. The regular people knew we were not a threat to their positions, so they treated us very well. I understand that this didn't happen in a lot of other areas.

So we literally worked ourselves through high school and through college, and I could have stayed on for graduate school, too, if I were going there. They would gladly taken me on. I remember when I was in my senior year they were interested to find out, "Do you want to become part of the company full time?" Personnel interviewed you, if you were interested, and they would welcome you into the company.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan,

were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. The Project focuses on collecting the oral histories of residents who can evoke Hoboken’s vanished industries through their recollections of employment in the city’s many factories and on the waterfront, and those who can capture for present and future generations the ways in which Hoboken’s rich ethnic and cultural diversity was once evident in the everyday life of the city. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, ten chapbooks have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material

continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

