

Helen Davis Debus

Interview August 20, 2012

Interviewed by Nancy Loane and Sandy Momyer
for the Historical Commission of Schuylkill Township

Transcribed by Nancy Loane

NL – This is the 20th of August, 2012, and we'll be interviewing Helen Debus. You pronounce it "DeeBus," right?

HD – Yes. But the next man I marry is not going to be named Debus. I have never had so much trouble. My name was "Davis" before I got married...and I married a "Debus."

And one woman called me on the phone one day and asked me....do you have time to listen to me?

NL,SM – Oh, yes. Sure!

HD – She asked me how to pronounce my name and I said, "It is Debus. "D" as in Denver. "E." "B" as in boy. "U." "S" as in Samuel." And after I got finished spelling it and pronouncing it she said, "Oh, DooBus." (Laughs.)

NL – Oh, no! She wasn't a very good listener there, was she? Tell me a little bit about you. Where and when were you born?

HD – I was born October 26, 1912, in Valley Forge.

NL – Where was the house?

HD – Across the bridge. I was born in Montgomery County. Right across the bridge.

NL – You're talking about the bridge here on route 23 by route 252?

HD – Yes. And I was born down there. I lived there for, I don't know about a year, and then father bought a little farm up on the hill.

NL – Is the home where you were born still there?

HD – No. It was near what they call the Bakehouse. (Also called the David Potts house, at the intersection of Route 23 and 252.) There were little houses there. There were a row of houses going around the dam, too, but they are gone now. The dam is, too.

NL – And then you moved up the hill? Up Colonial Springs Road?

HD – Yes, where Colonial Springs Road and Oakwood Lane meet there's a little road that goes up the hill. Of course all the roads were dirt. There were no street signs. And I moved up there. Mother and father had, oh, two or three cows and about thirty chickens so we always had milk and eggs. Of course father worked over at Tindle's, at the farm, at Valley Forge Farm over there. (Route 252, by Covered Bridge.)

And Mr. Tindle asked father one time if he would drown a cat that he had. And father said, "Sure, I'll drown her, but why do you want her drowned?" Well, Mr. Tindle said that he had this litter of kittens that were all white Persians, and this one kitten was white but she didn't have long hair. And he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to sell her. So father said, "I'll kill her, but maybe you'll let me have her. We just moved up there and we have too many rats and mice and I have a cow and I don't want them to eat my feed." And Mr. Tindle said, "Oh sure, take her." So we had a kitten.

NL – Was Mr. Tindle a farmer? A dairy farmer?

HD – He was a wealthy man. He was Senator Knox's son in law.

NL – Oh....Philander Chase Knox?

HD – Philander C. Knox. They lived near the covered bridge. There's a farm back there. I don't know who lives there now. Someone from the park, I suppose.

NL – Philander Chase Knox lived in the home by the covered bridge. (Now known as Maxwell's, and owned by Valley Forge NHP. The park library is located in the building.) What did your father do for him?

HD – Anything that needed to be done. Father was a blacksmith and he could do that and....for some reason father could look at something and fix it. But he only went to school for two years. Mother went for four.

NL – School wasn't compulsory then. Hummmmm.....Did you ever visit the Tindle's house?

HD – Oh, no. That was father's business. I was not interested in visiting.

NL – What is the first thing that you remember?

HD – I guess....I'll tell you what I remember. One time....my brother was 16 months older than me. And, they had this cat that Mr. Tindle had given father. And Ken, my brother, decided that he wanted me to hold the cat and squeeze it. And I guess I wasn't doing it hard enough and so he said, "Squeeze her." And I said, "I am squeezing her as hard as I can." And I was about three, and Ken was four. And Mother thought we were quiet, so she looked to see what we were doing. We were torturing the poor cat, and Ken thought that he was being nice to her.

NL – Ahhhh, poor cat.....Now let me think.....

As you were growing up, what kinds of things did you especially enjoy doing?

HD – Reading books. Reading mystery stories and things like that.

NL – Did you have any special authors that you liked?

HD – Oh well, yes, I didn't like kids' books or anything like that. I liked real good stories.

NL – Do you have any books that you remember being a favorite?

HD – I'll tell you what. I liked Zane Gray. Westerns.

NL – When I talked to you before, you talked about swimming down near the dam....

HD – Yes. It's not like it was then. There used to be a dam there, right at the corner of route 23 and 252. The dam breast ran parallel to the road. And so they took it down for some reason. I don't know why. Maybe there were afraid someone would get drowned in it, I don't know. But, anyway, they took it down. Maybe they were afraid someone would get drowned in it. You know where the P.O.S.of A. is? The lower part of the creek was down there. I was about 5 feet tall. I used to go down there and swim.

You know, it's funny. I think people back then had good sense, more than they do now. Because we used to go down there, all the boys and girls in Valley Forge used to go down there to swim. And they used to push me down to the bottom and stand on me. You know, if you have air in your lungs you'll come up. So they used to stand on me, not to hurt me, but to keep me down. And I let them do it! (Laughs)

NL – You let them do it! I guess you had confidence that they would let you up at the right time.

HD – All you had to do was to wiggle and they would let me go.

NL – Wiggle and up you came. What fun! Hum.....did you go ice skating on the pond that was off Valley Park Road? I think that would be fun.

HD – That was nice. The only thing is that I broke my leg up there.

And you know – of course I was a teenager then, and I went down I couldn't get up. Three people came over to skate me over to the edge, and one took my shoulders and one took this leg and one took that leg and that's how they pulled me over to the edge. Can you imagine?

NL – With a broken leg!

HD – And you know what I was thinking when they were hauling me in? Gee, I'm glad I have my silk pants on!

NL – That does get very important.....Hummm....Any movies that you enjoyed going to?

HD – I loved the movies, I loved them all. Anything I could go to I did. And I likedoh I can't think of his name. I saw the silent movies and I saw them when they first started to talk. And I thought that was wonderful.

NL – Did you go to the Colonial Theater?

SM – How did you get to the theater? Were there cars then? Did you go by horse and buggy?

HD – Well, my father had a horse and buggy. But he wouldn't take me to the movies. My father thought that was.....foolish.

NL – So how did you get into Phoenixville? Did you walk in?

HD – I only walked to school. I started to school when I was five. I graduated eight years later. It wasn't because I was especially bright or anything, it was just that I had started early. And the reason mother sent me over to school.....you know where the Holiday House is? (Now a white house beside the Valley Forge fire station.) That was the school. I went over there. We used to walk over because there weren't too many cars on the road or anything like that. We walked over there. Then there was a fire and the roof caught on fire.

And instead of building it up again, where the post office is now, that was the next school. The next year the first, second, third, and fourth grades went to the Baptist Church, and the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth went to the Methodist. I went to the Baptist Church and both my brothers went to the Methodist. (Both churches are located on route 23, near route 252.)

NL - Really? Until they had the new school built?

HD – Until they had the school built. That was that year. And it wasn't ready for us to get in the next year, so that's when we went up to Valley Park. The trolleys used to take us up to school there, at Valley Park.

SM – Going back for a minute – Why did they call it the Holiday House? Do you remember?

HD – They called it that after we got out of it. It was the Valley Forge School. I don't know why they called it the Holiday House. It sits up on the hill.

SM – Do you remember when the first cars came to Valley Forge?

HD – No, they just came. My aunt was the housekeeper for the big house up there, when you go up the hill. (50 Colonial Springs Road. Corner of Oakwood and Colonial Springs.) She kept house for a man named Mr. Welbank. And he was a - his mother was a direct descendant of a man named Charles Thomson who was here during the Revolution.

NL – Yes! Charles Thomson was Secretary of the Continental Congress.

HD - So I have a couple of things that belonged to him. When he died his wife had left him, she didn't want to live with him but she didn't want to divorce him, because then she couldn't get any money. It would have to be all one lump sum and I guess she didn't want that, but she She was from Philadelphia. And Mr. Welbank was from Philadelphia. But he was nice. Poor man, he put up with the Davis people. I used to go down there. Of course father sold him milk from the cows. In those days you could drink any kind of milk.

The house had a kitchen and a sun porch that Aunt Jenny used to keep flowers in and everything. And when Mr. Welbank died, Aunt Jenny was still living, and he didn't have any one to leave his money to. So he left her the house and he left her the money.

NL – Hummm.... So, how does it feel to be almost 100?

HD – Well, I'll tell you. Somebody asked me one time what my secret was...

NL, SM – Yes! We'd like to know, too!

HD – I said, "My secret for what?" "Well," they said, "for living so long." And I said, "Well, I didn't die."

NL – So that's your secret...Just keep living!

HD – I couldn't do anything about it.

NL – You don't drink orange juice every day? Or take a walk every day?

HD – I can't do much walking any more. I used to do a lot of walking. When I was a kid, I walked to high school.

SM – You walked to high school in Phoenixville?

HD – Um, hum. Four miles. We would go down here, oh, as early as we could, because the ice men used to come up here, in the trucks. And they used to pick up us and take us to school. And Mr. McGlathery was an insurance man who lived right there down by the Methodist Church, and he came by, and he picked us up.

SM – So the trolley wasn't running then?

HD - Sometimes it ran and sometimes it didn't. Mr. O'Connell, they were the ones who ran the trolley. The trolley came from down there, right across the bridge there (small bridge on Route 23, near Route 252) and it came right between this house – which used to be a cow barn, you know – and the house in front of it, and it ran up past where the Mansion House is (Route 23, now torn down, near "Steuben's headquarters"), all the way up to Phoenixville. And I think as far as it went was to Spring City. And they were planning to send the trolley to Pottstown, but it never materialized.

SM – Did it go up Valley Park Road?

HD - And it went right past the fire house and went past Holiday House, there's a stone wall there, and it went right past that. Then it went through the woods.

NL – Humm.....let's see. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

HD – I don't think I have any. I can't think of any. I worked all my life. When II graduated when I was 16, because I started early, you know. What did I do? Oh, the first job I had was working for a man who sold antiques. So I worked for a gift and antique shop. And I worked over here where the Mansion House is, there was a farm there. It's torn down now. That's where I worked. And then when winter came, they couldn't make any money out of Valley Forge, so they moved the gift and antique shop down to Norristown. Mr. Montague was from Norristown. So I used to go down there to work. I took the train.

Do you know how much I made when I started there in 1929? \$10.00 a week.

NL – Was that a good salary?

HD – Well, yes, for what I did. I waited on customers, made change.

NL – And then I know you worked at the gas station.

HD – At that time I was working over in Paoli. I drove over there. I worked for a chemical company, Ansul Chemical Company. It was during World War II. My brother Ken had the gas station. My brother and my future husband. I wasn't married to Willard then.

Oh, I'll tell you something about Willard! (Mr. Debus) He always said that he had "married an older woman" because I was few months older than he was. He was always saying funny things. I had to be sharp to be around him.

Anyway, Willard taught me how to do the books. But Ken never showed me how to do anything on the cars. I had to learn to do that myself. I used to be strong.

NL – And then you worked in the post office, too.

HD – Well, yes, but that was after the war was over. I had retired from my job in Paoli; that was a good job over there. I came over here, and I retired. One

day the man who was going to be postmaster asked if I would come over and help him out. So I wasn't doing anything so I said I would help him out.

I think I made 89.5 cents an hour.

NL – When did you stop working?

HD – I think it was in 1977. I graduated in 1929, and that's when I started working.

SM – The post office was here, by the soda shop, wasn't it? (Beside present day Gulf Station.)

HD – And I was the only one I knew who could leave the house at 7:30 and be at work at 7:30.

SM – Did you also work at the new post office?

HD – Oh, yes, when they built the new post office there I worked up there. I was the assistant to the post master there. It just happened.

NL – Well.....Thinking about driving. You have been driving for a long time. Who taught you to drive? When did you stop driving?

HD – My father taught me to drive. I had a hip replacement about three years ago. I was driving until then. I don't have a license now.

NL – And you don't have a car anymore, either.

HD – Oh, yes! I do! I have two cars. One was just sitting there, and I paid insurance on it and everything. So Gene sold that one for me. And then I just have the one car. I still have one car.

NL – Do you still get to go to the G-Lodge?

HD – Oh, yes. When I have anyone to take me. I go up there now and again.

NL – Do you still go to the hairdresser every week?

HD – Wednesday. I go Wednesday.

NL – Your hair looks great.

HD – I get my hair done, and then whoever takes me up there I buy them lunch at the G-Lodge.

NL – Do you have regrets? Anything that you’re sorry happened? Or something that you would like to do?... Want to be a concert pianist?

HD – Oh, I wish I could be a concert pianist! But I can’t work my fingers. But I do love music. I don’t have any regrets.

NL – What advice would you give young people coming along?

HD – I think I would tell them to work a little harder. I don’t think they do much anymore. They seem a little crazy.

Gene is my adopted son. I never had any children. I adopted him. The only thing I’m sorry about is that we don’t have any of our own, but I’m glad I was able to adopt Gene.

We were down at the shore last week. We went down to see the Thunderbirds. There’s a hat I got there on the edge of the sofa.

NL – So you would tell people to work a little harder.

HD – Well, of course... the thing of it is that I wish I knew how to work those things.....computers. I wish I knew how. And I hate not knowing how to do it. Gene said he was going to....he has one of these laptop things – he takes it over to work with him.

NL – What would you like about the computer? Email, when you are in contact with other people? The web?

HD – I just would like to know how to do it. Gene knows how to do it. He puts stuff on it. He was telling them that I was going to be 100 years old pretty soon, and he told them the things I do, and he said that he was taking good care of me. And I said, “I’m taking good care of you, too!”

NL – Over your lifetime you have seen many changes in Schuylkill Township. Are you happy with the Township? Do you have any advice?

HD – Oh, no, I would be the last one to tell anyone how to run the township. They know what they are doing. I wouldn't fuss about anything like that.

NL – Let's see.....

SM – I'm curious about life on the farm. Do you remember when you got electricity in the house? Water in the house?

HD – Oh indeed, yes! I had a brother, my oldest brother. He never graduated from the 8th grade. Father told him he had to go to summer school because you can't get a diploma or anything like that. He said he didn't want to go. And father said you either have to go to summer school or you have to learn a trade. So Lardy said – his name was Frances but he was kind of heavy and they called him Lardy – it started out as Dr. Lardpot, but you know how kids are – that got too long, so they called him Lardy. Even his nieces and nephews called him Uncle Lardy. So he said that he was going to learn a trade.

Electricity was just coming in. So Lardy went to Bridgeport. There was a man down there who was working on electricity, they were just starting to put electricity in the houses, and so Lardy went down there and I guess he either went on the train or something – I don't know how he got down there. Anyway, he got down there and he was there for quite some time. And then he learned it from the beginning. He was a good electrician. That's how we got our house wired.

NL – When was that?

HD – Oh, my.....That must have been before the stock market crash.

SM – How about the telephone?

HD – Mr. Welbank had a telephone. We didn't. We didn't use it much. Aunt Jenny would use it sometimes. Mother didn't have a telephone. She

wouldn't have one. She said that if anyone wanted to say anything to her, they could visit. And father didn't care one way or other.

NL – So when did you finally get a telephone?

HD – After I got married. We always had a telephone.

SM – A party line?

HD – No. I never had a party line.

SM – We had a party line. We lived out in Kimberton.

HD – Oh, did you know Stanley Davis?

SM – He was the postmaster.

HD – He was my uncle.

SM – Oh, Davis! Of course! He was there for a long time.

HD – He was born in Valley Forge. His father was my grandfather. His mother was my step-grandmother. They lived up in - oh what do you call it? – go past the school house, and turn into the left again – I can't remember it – Gene said that he would try to come home, and if I didn't remember something he would help.

NL – You're doing great!

HD – Some names I can't remember.

NL – How about television? Do you remember getting your first television?

HD – Yes, Lardy saw to it that we got that. He got us the radio and everything because he was interested in electricity and whatnot. He saw to it that we were well taken care of. I remember I had an aunt, my father's sister, who lived in Norristown, and she had five or six children and she was – her husband was a barber – and you know you don't get very much money for cutting somebody's hair. She was in bad shape. These were hard times. So

every now and then Aunt Jenny would go down there to Norristown and take food down to Aunt Mealy – her name was Amelia. And mother would always kill a chicken and go down and give her something, too, because they had five or six children and it must have been rough living.

NL – I would think so.....

SM – I drive by here all of the time, and now I think about all of things you talked about before, and it brings back a lot of thoughts about what this place used to look like.

HD – Well, you know, the house over there (points in the direction of one on the right) – that house was owned by a woman with the name of Steaver, Mag Steaver. Mag and her husband, every New Year's they went into Philadelphia to see the parade, the Mummers Parade.

NL – Have you gone into Philadelphia to see that parade?

HD – I used to work in Philadelphia. Sure I saw it. But I was never much for parades.

NL – Well.....Our time is about over. Thank you very much! Any final words you'd like to share? Any special mottos you live by?

HD – Save your money!

And - Can I sell you a cat? I have five of them.....

.....I've had a very nice life. I've even traveled a bit—Washington to see the cherry blossoms and New York City.... A very nice life.