NAME

Bobbie Thompson Interview

DATE

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DURATION

38m 58s

3 SPEAKERS

Thea Burgess
Bobby Thompson
Speaker 3

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:02] Thea Burgess
Hi, this is Thea Burgess from historic Red hook. It is Friday the 13th of March in 2026, and I'm interviewing Bobby Thompson and we're recording here at the Elmendorf Inn. Bobby, would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself, where and when you were born and a little bit about how you grew up?

[00:00:25] Bobby Thompson
I was born 14th of March, Montclair, new Jersey, and we grew up in Harrison, New York, and we lived there until I was 18. And then I got married, and it's all from there.

[00:00:51] Thea Burgess
And who did you marry.

[00:00:54] Bobby Thompson
Hank Thompson.

[00:00:56] Thea Burgess
And how did you and Hank end up here in Red hook? In Milan, actually.

[00:01:00] Bobby Thompson
Yeah. We had. Five children. Five children. And the sixth was due and the house was too small. And so we were looking up here and we looked and looked and looked. And finally we saw the house in Milan, and it had five bedrooms and two barns and a garage and a pond. And it was just perfect for the family. And so we bought it that day. We saw it.

[00:01:43] Thea Burgess
Wow.

[00:01:43] Bobby Thompson
That's great. Yeah, it was wonderful.

[00:01:45] Thea Burgess
And where exactly in Milan was? Were you? What was the.

[00:01:49] Bobby Thompson
Address? It turned well now. It used to be the main road coming from Pine Plains to Red hook. And then they they put the addition of Academy Hill Road went straight to 199. And so they used this as a little lane and Tom said, well what do you want to name it? Do you want to name it Thompson? I said, no, we'll call it Morehouse Lane, because that was the man that really built the big house.

[00:02:22] Thea Burgess
So from just that decision, it sounds like you, you were interested in local history. And I know for myself, I've depended upon your book out to Milan for a lot of research. How did you become interested in the history of this area?

[00:02:37] Bobby Thompson
Well, I didn't I In 1969, Herman, I can't remember his last name. Came down to the house. He said, how would you like to be Milan's first historian? And I said, good, what does a historian do? And he said, he handed me a pamphlet on old cemeteries. He said, this is what they do. I said, oh, okay, I will. And that's how it got started. And the writing got started because we had a Maryland community association at that point. This was 1969, and Maryland was so divided. Our telephone numbers were Pine Plains, Rhinebeck, Red hook. Newspapers were the same thing, and so were the school systems where the kids went to different school systems. And we didn't have anything that united Milan. And so we formed the association, and we sent out a newsletter every month. And on the cover of it, Artsy stripper would draw a picture, and then I would do the research for the picture. And that's how I got started with the history of Milan.

[00:04:06] Thea Burgess
It's it's so important that you did that because those stories would not be here now without you having done that. How did you become involved with the Elmendorf Inn?

[00:04:19] Bobby Thompson
Oh. Well, I was good friends with Barbara Bielenberg, and She and her husband, Bob went over to Claire Lucy's and picked up six boxes of files that Clara had, and it was all Red hook files, and we brought them back here. And so Barbara was busy working on the the room that became the archival room. And she put me in the small bedroom and that had a broken glass window. It had a crack in the wall that came down from the ceiling. And we had one light bulb. And I sat with Clara's files and processed them. And Barbara said, this was all paper. And Barbara said, what you do is you say box number one, file number one, paper number one, and then paper number two, paper number three, and on until we had the six boxes done. And by that time we had a file cabinet. And I thought, wouldn't Clara be happy that all these files were in a file cabinet?

[00:05:47] Thea Burgess
Absolutely. Yeah. So we know that around 1976, the inn was starting to be restored. What can you tell me? What the restoration of the inn meant to you? And maybe, maybe you could describe what the inn was like before the restoration began.

[00:06:06] Bobby Thompson
I don't know.

[00:06:07] Thea Burgess
You don't know?

[00:06:09] Bobby Thompson
I didn't at that point. I was very involved with Milan and doing research. Clara and I would go down to Poughkeepsie and we would be doing research. And so I didn't really know very much except that Rosemary Kuhn was trying to get out of Grand Union's clutches. Kind of. And took over the Elmendorf Inn.

[00:06:38] Thea Burgess
And when you said you would go down to Poughkeepsie to do research, what kind of research were you doing?

[00:06:44] Bobby Thompson
We did mostly deed research, and we were also in the surrogate's office doing wills for the people, but it was mostly Milan people that were there.

[00:07:00] Thea Burgess
So with the restoration of the inn and we're sitting here in the inn now did you over the years, did you. I know you focused mainly on Milan, but would you come here and do do things with the inn with, with the Red hook community?

[00:07:18] Bobby Thompson
Yeah. As I say, I was good friends with Barbara and when they had meetings, we, we would come to the meetings and participate in them.

[00:07:34] Thea Burgess
And what do you think it had meant to the, to the town. Do you have any, any feeling for that.

[00:07:42] Bobby Thompson
Oh it meant a great deal. In the fact that it was a historic structure and there wasn't a business in it. It was a place where everybody could come. And I think that was important. They had to have a place to meet, and this was perfect. I can remember when we had sheep and Mary Kelly and I were spinning and I thought to myself, this would be a great place for a group of spinners to get together. And Mary saw that it was done.

[00:08:27] Thea Burgess
And that evolved into the spinners group.

[00:08:30] Bobby Thompson
No, I didn't, because I was over in Saugerties at that time.

[00:08:34] Thea Burgess
Oh, okay. So you had mentioned that getting the saving the inn from the clutches of Grand Union. Do you, can you elaborate on that? What you know about that process? No. You really don't know, but you do. That wasn't.

[00:08:47] Bobby Thompson
I knew that they wanted. They wanted the property because they wanted more parking space. And Rosemary saw that they didn't get it.

[00:09:02] Thea Burgess
And how did that do you know anything about how that occurred? No. All right. Well, you mentioned also that the in seemed to be very important to the town. Besides the gathering place, do you think anything do you think there was something with the bicentennial occurring in 1976? Like what was that like in myelin? And because now we're here this year is about 250. So the 250th anniversary. And there seem to be a real renaissance of interest in local history. Can you talk a little bit about that and what that was like in the in the mid 1970s, or were there any kinds of events that occurred in myelin or here in Red hook that you recall? No, no. Yes. Yeah, it's been a while. I remember being in a parade, and that's about all I remember from it. But All right. What do you think? You mentioned that it was an important building here in Red hook. And for you, the history of myelin was important. What do you think is so important about us understanding local history?

[00:10:13] Bobby Thompson
I think to save what is here now. The small houses in Red hook are worth saving. They're wonderful houses. Actually they're perfect for senior citizens. Just, you know, one, one story or a story and a half. They're well taken care of. The big houses. Yes. They have their portion of the game here in the city. In the town. A lot of people in the town worked for the Livingstons and the other people that lived there. And I think to save the grounds, the save the trees, save everything that is here now. Don't let it be destroyed. Don't let a big box store come in and take over what everybody likes. You've already got one down here and that's, that's all you need. You don't need another one. I think to keep it as it originally was once. Pretty much.

[00:11:44] Thea Burgess
So you're talking about the importance of trying to preserve what we have and appreciate what we have. What do you think the Elmendorf and similar buildings mean to people today? And what do you think they might mean in the future?

[00:12:00] Bobby Thompson
Well, I would hope they'd still be here in the future. And that the idea of conserving what is already here and making sure that it stays here.

[00:12:17] Thea Burgess
So as, as we are attempting to conserve and maintain what is, what is here. What do you think are some important things people, everyday people kind of like you like myself because you did not you weren't didn't have a history background until you got involved with Milan. Correct. What do you think like everyday people could do, and what advice would you give to someone who maybe has a passing interest in history, but but also kind of values what you're talking about, preserving what we have.

[00:12:49] Bobby Thompson
Well, when they come. A lot of them don't know what they want to do. They like the town. And if they've got a fairly old house, they like the house. They want to know more about the house. They want to know more about the town. It's not like being in New York City. You put roots down and you work to keep it that way. And I think that's what a lot of newcomers do. They want to keep it this way.

[00:13:38] Thea Burgess
In Milan, what were some of the surprising things you discovered as you were kind of inventorying and then writing about the different places?

[00:13:53] Bobby Thompson
Oh, it's a wonderful experience. The people were great. They were very frank about what they were doing and what they would see. I interviewed so many of the people that were there, and I went into houses that normally I wouldn't have been in and some of them were. No. They had restored some of them, which I wouldn't have done the way they did it. I went into one and it had been in the same family since a revolution. And somebody, one of the people that had owned it, they had painted the floor all different colors. It was awful. And what could you say, you know? But the people they loved their houses, you know.

[00:15:23] Thea Burgess
So are there other other aspects of that that were surprising to you that and it sounds like you not only got to know the houses, but you got to know the people.

[00:15:36] Bobby Thompson
Yeah. Well, I got to know the superintendent of Highways. Well. I interviewed his wife and his sister. They were wonderful people. Very kind. Webb was very protective of his street finances. He didn't want anybody to take any money away from that. Very protective. I interviewed Dick Battenfeld and I worked for for him for a long time. Walt Hermans was another one. I didn't realize, but Helen was a truck driver for a while, and these were the different occupations that people had, and they had sheep. And Helen said, the only good thing about sheep was they ate poison ivy. People were were very kind. And then there were the churches. And the one. Well, of course Churchville Church was gone. There was another one. The grounds were there, but they had burnt the church down. And that was a cemetery there. The cemeteries were great. They were very interesting because all the old people in Maryland were buried there.

[00:17:29] Thea Burgess
Did you have a favorite cemetery?

[00:17:31] Bobby Thompson
No. No.

[00:17:34] Thea Burgess
You just liked seeing the names and hearing from families that had been buried there.

[00:17:40] Bobby Thompson
Well, maybe I did. It was the one at the end of our road. It was Oh, Benjamin. Thorne. Thorne. It was a Thorne cemetery. And they were Quakers. And his son was the first supervisor of the town. And that was a favorite cemetery, I guess, because Lucy's and Thornley's and us. And we went in and cleaned it up one time, and we found steps going into it from the from the road. There were stone steps. And what we didn't realize at that point was the Quaker Church was right next door.

[00:18:40] Thea Burgess
How about your house that you lived in? You said it was big and old, and I'm assuming you did a history of your house. What did you discover about your house?

[00:18:50] Bobby Thompson
Everything. Always something needed to be fixed. But it's interesting because there was a fireplace in the basement with a crane coming out. There was a stone oven for bread. There was a stairway, very steep going up to the second floor. At one point, somebody lived there before 1790 because he was a he was in the revolution and he was a captain in the revolution, and he had men and they patrolled the roads. That's what they did. But they lived there. And then at some point there was a James Stewart who was also in the revolution, and he lived there and then after him, I don't know, between him and Moorhouse, and I think it was probably Moorhouse that built the house as it was then, or as it is now.

[00:20:18] Thea Burgess
And do you recall the first gentleman you mentioned who was in the Revolution? Did you ever find out his name or you just heard that there he had been in the revolution?

[00:20:28] Bobby Thompson
Did I find out his name?

[00:20:29] Thea Burgess
His name? The first gentleman you mentioned before. Stewart.

[00:20:33] Bobby Thompson
No. I know after the revolution and before the 1790 census, he moved to Pennsylvania. But I can't I can't remember his name. He's in the he's in the books on the revolution.

[00:21:03] Thea Burgess
Are there any other things that you might want to tell us about that you know about with the history of Milan or here in Red hook? You know, the larger area, things that you found interesting as you were doing all of your research?

[00:21:16] Bobby Thompson
Oh, well, I always wanted to research. I think the because all my children went to Red hook schools, so I was very involved with going back and forth. I was very involved with my children. I don't think they would know that now. But that was my job. I didn't work until the last one was in kindergarten. I didn't know how to do anything. I didn't have good handwriting. I couldn't be a receptionist or a secretary or anything that would would apply for a woman who was in her late early 50s. And so the kids were, were my world. And and the spinning when we had the, the kids were in four h and so we had sheep and you have sheep, you have wool and you knit and then you spin and now I'm weaving. And so that was all part of it. The whole, the whole bit.

[00:22:49] Thea Burgess
And you said that you at one point worked for Battenfeld. Yeah. And what did you do there?

[00:22:55] Bobby Thompson
I was a grunt.

[00:22:58] Thea Burgess
And what does that mean?

[00:22:59] Bobby Thompson
Well, it means I would help sort flowers in the morning. I would make and pull apart boxes that they were mailed in. I made newspaper covers that they were shipped in.

[00:23:16] Thea Burgess
And this is for the anemones.

[00:23:21] Bobby Thompson
I helped, so. Help dig. Sow the seeds and we. We raised them, but I never planted the. Never planted in the greenhouses. Because in the summertime that was children time.

[00:23:38] Thea Burgess
So it sounds from your background and I'm just curious how did you get into writing? Because you're a phenomenal writer. And I was a high school English teacher and I admire your writing.

[00:23:54] Bobby Thompson
I don't know. I guess. I used to write a lot of stupid poetry when I was in high school. I went to a boarding school, and I hated it.

[00:24:13] Thea Burgess
Well, where was that?

[00:24:14] Bobby Thompson
I'm not going to tell you.

[00:24:16] Thea Burgess
Oh, okay. You blocked it from your mind.

[00:24:20] Bobby Thompson
And then I went to a junior college, which I loved.

[00:24:25] Thea Burgess
And can you say where that was?

[00:24:27] Bobby Thompson
Yeah. Okay. Endicott junior in Massachusetts on the Salem Bay. And now it's coeducational and it's four years. Then it was a junior college and women only. But it was wonderful. People were great. Teachers were great. I enjoyed it very much. And I was editor of the. Yearbook. And I think it will, I don't know, it just evolved.

[00:25:11] Thea Burgess
We're kind of getting to the end of my questions. But I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how buildings and locations in our town here in Red hook for you and Milan, and just kind of in general for us as humans. What is how does that connect us to our history? Do you think?

[00:25:32] Bobby Thompson
Pardon?

[00:25:33] Thea Burgess
How do how does how do the buildings and locations in our towns connect us to our history? Do you think?

[00:25:44] Bobby Thompson
Well, a lot, because it's all still here. I really I really don't like these modern mansions. Many mansions, I call them, but it's part of it. I don't know how long that's going to last. There must be terrible to heat up. Families aren't that big anymore. If some of them, they're not even families. I don't know, it's. I can't answer that.

[00:26:37] Thea Burgess
Okay. Are there any locations in Milan or here in Red hook that are no longer here? Any buildings that that you regret that aren't here any longer?

[00:26:49] Bobby Thompson
Yes. The little house that was next to the Lutheran church. They tore that down. That was too bad because it was a pre-revolutionary house. And I remember going in there, and, I don't know, we were with somebody, probably the bilderbergs. And I said, well, you know, this is really old. And somebody put their hand through the ceiling and all the insulation came down, because that's what it was. And I think they tried to save it, but they couldn't or they didn't want to. And the property is not being used now. It's just vacant.

[00:27:44] Bobby Thompson
And the church is in Milan. There's a church that's gone. And I can remember when Aldridge said, well, can't you find a way to save it. And it was three quarters of the walls were down. How do you save a building like that?

[00:28:07] Thea Burgess
I. I'm trying to think of how to ask you this question. You just have such a wide Range of experience and knowledge and understanding and and you're part of the history of Milan in here in Red hook. And I'm wondering if you if there are any things that you might like to tell people who are just starting to get involved with this kind of concept of preserving our past and here in the present.

[00:28:36] Bobby Thompson
I would say get involved. Offer a little time. You probably. Offer things where your children are involved. Do more or do as much as you do for your children, for the town. For an organization in the town for a group in the town. Do a little bit more if you, if you, if you've got the time and most of the people do, or they say they don't, but they do, they've got time to do what they like to do. So do something else.

[00:29:43] Thea Burgess
You mentioned that you really love doing research. Are you still doing research? No, no. And what was what was something recently that you researched? I know that you've done a lot with myelin and.

[00:29:57] Bobby Thompson
Oh boy. I decided, well, I wrote a book on, we call it the Revitalization of Milan. Because there was a whole group of Croatians that came into Red Hook and Milan, and they came at a good time in the early 1900s because the farms were gone or they were going and there wasn't anything left of them. And so these men and women came in and they lived there. They brought their kids up there and they brought the farms back. So I wrote a book on that, and that was we we did a book. And then I decided, well, I ought to do the 1790 census. Now that involved my own Pine Plains and northeast. And I had a terrible time remembering the name of northeast. What is the town over there?

[00:31:03] Thea Burgess
Millerton.

[00:31:04] Bobby Thompson
Millerton. Yeah. Of course. And so I did, And I prefaced it with why the government started a census in 1790, when it took years to to get a declaration. But they did. And all the reason for that. And then I went and did all the people that I could find on the 1890 census. And I did put some footnotes in. But the county historian, they took the book down there or took the pages down there. And he said, oh, there's not enough footnotes.

[00:31:52] Thea Burgess
Yeah. Footnotes are hard to find for the 1790s.

[00:31:55] Bobby Thompson
I know I'm not going to publish this. Yeah. And so that was the last one I did.

[00:32:02] Thea Burgess
But you do have Autumn Island, which is the articles that you used to do for the newsletter. And then you up to Milan is the other book about the.

[00:32:13] Bobby Thompson
Milan because they came up from the city.

[00:32:19] Thea Burgess
Is there anything else that you would like to share with with us about your involvement with the historical community here at the Elmendorf in your relationships?

[00:32:31] Bobby Thompson
Well, I loved doing all the genealogical. Can't pronounce.

[00:32:36] Thea Burgess
It. I can't spell genealogy, so. Yeah.

[00:32:39] Bobby Thompson
I love doing that. There were so many families that were interwoven. And I loved the same thing about Milan. And I loved that the houses too. You go up for Newmarket Road and there are a lot of old houses up that way And I like that too. I like the strawberry fields. What was the name?

[00:33:23] Thea Burgess
I'm not sure where.

[00:33:25] Bobby Thompson
North of Red hook.

[00:33:26] Thea Burgess
North. Oh. Spring Lake Road, Turkey Hill. Those fields.

[00:33:33] Bobby Thompson
Aren't there anymore.

[00:33:33] Thea Burgess
Though. You know what? We can find out. And then we can add a note to this, because I would. I didn't even know there were strawberry fields up there.

[00:33:42] Speaker 3
But where we used to go pick strawberries.

[00:33:46] Thea Burgess
Right? Yeah, yeah.

[00:33:49] Speaker 3
Yeah. It's tricky.

[00:33:50] Bobby Thompson
It's what's the name?

[00:33:52] Speaker 3
It's either Turkey Hill or Spring Lake. I always forget where they.

[00:33:54] Bobby Thompson
By knowing the name of the. The farm.

[00:33:57] Thea Burgess
Can remember.

[00:33:59] Speaker 3
I can't remember the name of the family.

[00:34:01] Thea Burgess
Once we find out, we'll definitely let you know though. So, Well, that's sort of where. Oh. Go ahead. Hi, I'm Mary Chang and I'm a volunteer here, and I've been a part of some of the other oral history interviews. And I heard that you mentioned Barbara Bielenberg a number of times. And I wonder if you could say more about her and her husband.

[00:34:22] Bobby Thompson
She was amazing. She was she was amazing. And I didn't realize until after she passed that she was such a wonderful photographer. They had her daughter put on a instead of a wake or anything like that. It was a memorial for Barbara and she had all her photographs in this room in this end. And they were she lived in New York City and she had gone to, I don't know, An Eleanor. I don't know when to take colleges out. And the Midwest. And she was a wonderful historian. She had worked for Sleepy Hollow, I think. And I think she worked a little bit for Montgomery Place. But she knew so much, but she'd never tell you. She worked upstairs and picked out the rug. I didn't like the color, the rug, but she said it was perfect for the historian for the room. And she was great to work with. We would always go over to the end or to the diner for lunch and Christmas time. They'd give us a free lunch because we were. We were always there. It was just part of it. And Bob was so great to us. He fell and broke his hip. And that was kind of the end of, you know, all our lunches together. So. But she was she was very good.

[00:36:40] Thea Burgess
We also spoke with Laurie Kintner earlier, and she spoke very highly of Rosemary Coons. I know you mentioned Rosemary as well. What are some of your memories of Rosemary and involvement with her?

[00:36:52] Bobby Thompson
I didn't know.

[00:36:53] Speaker 3
Her.

[00:36:53] Thea Burgess
You didn't.

[00:36:54] Speaker 3
Know.

[00:36:54] Bobby Thompson
Her? No. I knew Maynard, her husband.

[00:37:02] Thea Burgess
Okay. So I do have a kind of a final question. Given all you've done for Milan and for this larger area, Red hook with with history, how would you like your involvement with local history to be remembered?

[00:37:20] Bobby Thompson
My book. Actual.

[00:37:24] Thea Burgess
Books. And what what about the books?

[00:37:33] Bobby Thompson
There were a lot of things in it. There was a religious revival kind of thing. There were. When recessions came. That was in there. When the people came, George said, said his family. They were in there. The Quakers, they were in there. There were a whole different bunch of ideas and subjects that were in there. I think more than just what was written.

[00:38:25] Thea Burgess
Well, that's one of the things that I really love about your books is that you tell the story of locations, but then that transfers into stories of the people who live there, and then how the larger events affected them. And I think local history is all the richer for all you've done for it. I thank you for that.

[00:38:47] Bobby Thompson
Oh.

[00:38:47] Thea Burgess
Absolutely. It is so so I think that's it. Unless there's anything more you'd like to say? No. Okay. Thank you so much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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