

INTERVIEWEE: JACK STETSON  
INTERVIEWER: Theresa Buzaid  
SUBJECT: Danbury Fair  
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**TAPE 1 OF 2**

JS: Basically, my association with the Fair comes from the fact that John W. Leahy who was the owner of the Fair from the mid-40s to his death in 1975 was my step-grandfather. I actually lived at the Fair grounds shortly after I was born in a big old house on the corner of Backus Avenue and Kenosia Avenue in a spot formerly known as Backus Corners which was part and parcel at that time of the Fair grounds property. So I basically had an association with the Fair directly my whole life. Later on I became, after Mr. Leahy's death, I became vice president and secretary of the Fair and rented all the concession space and did any great number of jobs around the Fair grounds. And association there, after school, in the summer time and during college in the summer time, I did maintenance over there and even while I was vice president and rental agent over there, I used to get all that paper work done in the wintertime and then when the weather got good, I had the good fortune of going to the Fair grounds and help out with the maintenance over there for a good many years.

TB: Painting?

JS: Painting and putting up the signs and putting up all the figures and maintaining them. I learned to do a little carpentry, a little electrician work, a little plumbing, a little welding and most everything else along the way. Not enough to ever make a living at but enough to basically fix my own house most of the time. So that was quite an experience.

TB: Did you have to take the statues down for the winter is that it and store them somewhere?

JS: Sure. They were weather proof for a short time but they needed to be maintained and during fair week, of course a lot of them would get broken. Kids would jump on them, and what not, and the weather took its toll. So we would have to take everything down once the fair was over and store it all in the barns and a lot of the stuff was marked for the carpenters and the painters to restore over the winter and get them freshened up for the next year and then we would spend a good part of the next summer getting them all out again. It took a lot longer getting them out and put them in position than it did to take them down of course. The rest of the things we did in the summer times was to maintain the buildings. A lot of the buildings were nearly 100 years old. They were old barns. We had to put new sills and new roofs and new siding. Mount new signs. Continuous maintenance of the plant which was old and held together more by paint than anything else.

TB: Do you know any background on Mr. Leahy? When he was born, where he went to school?

JS: Mr. Leahy was born June 5, 1895 and his father was a bartender in one of the many bars on White Street which were popularly attended by the hatters in town. From what I understand, they used to run out at their lunchtime and drink in order to control the DTs that they got from the mercury poisoning and his father participated in that. He was born upstairs at 10 Balmforth Avenue which is where the Light Rock Company operates out of today. And he lived there and quit school at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The Balmforth Avenue School was where his education was completed. And went into as an apprentice at the Turner Machine Co. down the street to learn to be a machinist. And typically they did parts manufacture for the hatting industry. So he apprenticed there. And then when his father died, John decided that he needed to go into business for himself. He opened up a little grinding shop with some used machinery on Crosby Lane which is a non-existing street now--roughly runs between Crosby Street and White Street and hung over the Still River there. And he ran the little spot there and started his centerless grinding business there. He became quite successful. He was focused on his work. He didn't mind working 24 hours a day if he could. And was able to get some orders from, I think it was the Ryker Truck Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut and he did some brake parts and he did some other parts for some of the hat factories around the town. Little by little he was able to make a good living at it and support his mother for a few years and what-not.

TB: What was his mother's and father's name?

JS: His father was John W. Leahy, Sr. and his mother was Anna Kohler Leahy. And John knew every character in Danbury being a local boy and his business was right in the center of town and he could tell stories by the hour. I wish I had tapes of some of his stories but I don't. But he was a character himself and he was always interested in show business and I understand that when movies were popular at the Empress Theater on Elm Street, he used to be able to set up an automatic run on some of his machines and he would run up and watch the latest movie in town and come back and see if the machine run was still on its way. I guess he probably had some help by then too. And he went to every parade, and every circus and any extravaganza that came through town he was also interested in. When the opportunity came to get involved in the Fair, he jumped right in line and took over its reins. So that was pretty interesting. In the meantime, he had gotten into the fuel oil business. The oil burner was invented and of course, it was a great convenience. People were using wood and coal. And all the great drawbacks to that were eliminated when the automatic oil burner came along. And he foresaw that it was going to be a great convenience so that he got into the oil business. He associated himself with the city service company and opened up this office here at 130 White Street with a little gas station and a little office. And he started selling oil burners and delivering oil and of course we are still here ever since then. That was about 1928.

TB: Did he buy the property from the New Haven Railroad?

JS: This particular property out front, I am not sure who he bought that from but the railroad owned everything behind us. And they owned that up until the 1950s when he

did purchase it and he constructed the oil tanks out back which we just took down this summer. And the big building that we use for a warehouse was a freight administration building for the NY, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. Of course they did a huge freight business with the hatting industry here. It was all centered behind us and there were passenger trains. One of our garages down in back was in fact a dormitory for conductors. They used to bring the passenger cars in here at night and steam them out and clean them and the conductors that would have an early morning run would sleep in the so-called dormitory down in back and get ready to hop on the trains. There are still 2 sidings buried out back here in the ground which we run into we try to put a fence post or something. Somewhere along the line he met my grandmother, Mrs. Leahy. She was a teacher at Danbury High School.

TB: What did she teach?

JS: She taught English. I am not sure how they got together. But she was a single mother at the time and was looking for some security and found John Leahy. They got married in 1935, it was right in that area anyway, and he had been a bachelor all his life.

TB: Gladys?

JS: Gladys. Anyway, she captured John Leahy who had been a confirmed bachelor and really wanted only to work. He worked, like I said he was focused on his work 24 hours a day and he was in his 40s when they got married. And she helped him form, what they called at the time the Jewel Gas Business which is the propane gas business we operate today and she invented the name Jewel Gas with his initials JWL and they called it Jewel Gas for many many years. Later on we just switched it to Leahy's.

In the 1940s, I think it was probably about 1943, a customer came in that had a back bill due, an oil bill, and wanted to speak to Mr. Leahy to see if she could make some arrangements for payment. And what she offered him was a share of stock in the fair that had been passed down to her. And he considered it for a little while and he said, Sure. So he settled her bill with her donation to him of her share of stock.

TB: One share?

JS: One share. And he went home and told Gladys that he had a share of stock in the fair and basically she said to him, "Whatever are you going to do with that?" He said, "Well, I don't know." At this time, the fair was closed down for WWII. It had been closed 1941 was the last. There were a great deal of many mortgages on the fair. It had fallen on hard times especially not being able to have any income come in and the maintenance continued and what not. And Mr. Rundle, Mr. Mortimer Rundle at the time, was really getting on in age and he had no heirs who were interested in operating the fair and he was really having a problem as to what to do with it. He didn't know when the war was going to be over, when they would be able to reopen and basically how long he was going to live. He was well into his 80s by then. So Mr. Leahy with his one share of stock went down to the fair office which was over, on the corner of White and Main, over what we

all knew as the Feinson building for many years. It was upstairs over that. And he went in there and talked with Mr. Rundle and said I have a share of stock. Mr. Rundle asked him what he paid for it. He said "Well, it has a value of about \$100." He wanted to know if that was a good number and Mr. Rundle said "That it was probably fair for a share of stock." And he says, "Of course you understand that the fair is basically out of business at this point. What is your interest in it?" And he said, "Well, I think I would like to buy some more share and see if I can revive this thing." So Mr. Rundle said, well he had the controlling block of over 50% at the time.

TB: How many shares total, do you know what it was?

JS: I think there were, I could look this up, I think there were in the neighborhood of 500 shares. The great majority, except for the block held by Mr. Rundle, were held one share at a time by people all over the countryside.

TB: WOW

JS: Most of them had been handed down over the years through generations from original shareholders and what not. So they were going to be hard to buy up. But Mr. Rundle sold him a few shares more and needed some young blood basically to get into it. And Mr. Leahy was interested and so he as able to buy enough shares from Mr. Rundle to be able to vote himself in as the General Manager. And basically, he loaned the fair some more of his own money because he couldn't get anymore from the banks and started to do repairs over there. The buildings had really fallen on hard times and they hadn't put much money into them. And he started to put basically piles of money into refurbishing the buildings and paving the roads and getting ready to start the fair when the war was over. When the war finally ended, they resumed the racing program. Midget racing was very popular at the time. Of course, they hadn't been able to run that through the fair either. The war was over in August, whenever VE Day was. And they were able to start a racing program shortly thereafter. They ran midget races from shortly after the close of WW II that fall into November and were able to raise some more cash in order to do some refurbishing and run the first fair, which I think was the 1947 fair, I think was the first fair since the war had closed. It might have been 1946.

TB: 1946?

JS: It might have been 1946.

TB: I think it was 1946.

JS: I would have to check all those numbers. But at any rate, Mr. Rundle remained President of the fair which Mr. Leahy promised him he could be.

TB: He still had shares?

JS: He still had shares. He remained President of the Fair until his death. I think he died at the age of 92. And little by little, he continued to sell his shares to Mr. Leahy. And Mr. And Mrs. Leahy spent their Sunday afternoons running all around the countryside trying to buy up the rest of them. And he always had a lot of stories about the visits he had with different people who didn't want to give up their share of stock and it was basically worthless to them and

TB: Didn't you say they get a free pass?

JS: The main thing a shareholder got because dividends hadn't been paid for years and when they were, they were like 15 cents a share, something like that. But the main thing a shareholder got was a shareholder's pass to the fair every year. And that was a prestigious thing to have and hold and be able to use and if you didn't use it yourself, you could be a big wheel and give it to somebody else because you had a pass to the fair. So that a lot of the share holders were very reluctant to give up their passes. Of course, Mr. Leahy reversed that program as soon as he could and that was probably one of the reasons for the lack of revenue at the fair were a number of passes they gave out. You can't give away your product. That is basically what the old management did to a large extent.

TB: Especially 500 people.

JS: Oh yeah. The passes were spread all over town too. From city hall all the way down to anyone who had any kind of a title and any kind of political power in town and Mr. Leahy saw that all that stopped. It became very unpopular for awhile but he needed to raise money in order to keep the fair going. And like I said, you can't give away your product.

TB: Do you still have that ledger?

JS: Yes I do.

TB: Could I take a picture later of you with that ledger?

JS: Sure. So basically, he started operating the fair. And had his own ideas about how a fair ought to operate. And he continued to put basically over the years 100s of thousands of dollars into that plant in order to improve it and make it people friendly and he paved all roads and put benches around. Painted and refurbished all the buildings. Brought all these fiberglass figures in to decorate the grounds with and really created more of a children's park out of it than anything else. Although of course, adults came in droves but the focus of the old management had been horse racing as well as all the exhibits and what not. When Connecticut outlawed para mutual betting, the interest in horse racing died right off and of course the other thing that came along was the automobile. And as agriculture died in the area, people were interested in the automobile more and less in horse racing. And so they never restarted their horse racing after Mr. Leahy reopened the fair. So he had to find other things to attract the people. He opened up these little

themed villages. The first one was the New England Village. And then he did the Gold Town, Western Village when Davey Crockett thing was popular during the mid 50s and then later on in the early 60s, they opened up what was formerly the horse barns for the racing operation and refurbished them all into the New Amsterdam Dutch Village. Basically, we were attracting a large New York audience, and that was to interest them in their history of New York City and that was quite successful. At the same time, we ran the stock car program all summer long which was widely popular. As I read in today's newspaper still would be if it could be restarted and we lived off that money all summer long basically in order to continue refurbishing and get ready for the fair week.

TB: I understand there were like 10,000 people would come on a Saturday night.

JS: Yeah. We had a total capacity of about 10,000 people. And our average week-in, week-out was about 7,500 people. And there has been no other sporting event in the Danbury area that ever drew that many people on a consistent basis. We did that for 30 years.

TB: One side note, Do you think the baseball team can draw that many consistently? Just a personal opinion here.

JS: My personal opinion is NO. Race fans are rabid, basically. And of course racing is almost always exciting especially Saturday night type-stock-car-racing on a short track because there is the wrecks and you get to know the drivers and what not. The baseball thing, I don't know. I can't stay awake through 3 innings myself. It is very slow. And if they get local players, we may be able to revive a lot of interest but if they import people from out-of-town that nobody knows, I don't know. Of course, the population, the character of the population of Danbury and the Danbury area has changed a whole lot in the last 20 years. So who knows? I hope it is successful. But, and it may be. We'll see.

TB: We'll see. Right. But the racing was quite a memory.

JS: It certainly was.

TB: You could hear it all over town.

JS: Yep

TB: And the lights, the spot light.

JS: They had some 3 WW II 60" anti aircraft lights that Mr. Leahy had purchased from government surplus and we shined them in the sky every week to draw attention as if we needed to draw anymore attention. But everything he did was a spectacle. And there is all kinds of little backyard race tracks around the country even at this time and I have been to quite a few of them and none of them do it in the style that Mr. Leahy did. Most of them have a lot of dirt around and falling down bleachers and what not in lot of the small ones and he kept everything pristine. We mowed the lawn all the time. After the

inside wall was demolished every week, we ran right out on Monday morning and put it back to together, we repainted it, we restripped it and when Saturday night came, it looked untouched even though it had been half-destroyed the week before and he had bubble machines up in the rafters of the grandstand. During intermission, bubbles would come down and they would play music. And none of this had anything to do with the racing but it was all part of the spectacle, the search lights and everything that we did over there. So that was part of the appeal. It was an old plant but they kept it clean, they kept it painted. And they kept it a nice place to go. And that was part of the appeal besides the racing program.

So that was continued for quite a long time. Mr. Leahy and his long time associate C. Irving Jarvis who was basically the detail man, operated that from the first year up until, well Irving Jarvis died in 1969, that was our 100<sup>th</sup> year, and basically Fred Fern who was operating this business at the time, took over as a major assistant to Mr. Leahy in Mr. Jarvis' place and I came on board to do the rentals which Mr. Jarvis had done but he had also booked all the acts and the carnival and everything else.

TB: Was it consistently the same every year? Or was there a lot of change?

JS: Some things were the same and some things continually changed. A lot of the acts that we presented around the fair grounds and in front of the grandstand did change according to the fact that some of these people were not available and new things came along. Mr. Leahy especially sometimes Mr. Jarvis went to a lot of other fairs and a lot of exhibitions all the rest of the year to find new acts and new entertainments and they were always pleased to bring something new and something spectacular because nobody wants to look at the same old show.

The fair itself stayed basically the same and the changes were very gradual over the years. People came to the fair because they wanted to find what they expected to find some of the stuff that had been there for many many years. It was tradition and people were disappointed when things disappeared. A lot of the things that did disappear did so out of necessity. It was an agricultural fair to begin with and little by little, by little, agriculture disappeared from this area. People's interest in it waned. They didn't know anything about it anymore and then it was always fun to go and eavesdrop on these New Yorkers that came up that didn't know a pig from a goat and so we couldn't very well have barns full of different breeds of pigs or goats because they all looked alike to the great majority of the people. So Mr. Leahy's idea was to have a cattle barn, and have a horse barn, and have a pig barn and a goat barn and a poultry barn where people can go in and see representatives of these different breeds because the big all fashioned competition among breeds was gone. Nobody raised them in the area anymore. And the ones that did couldn't afford to leave the farm for 10 days to bring their animals up here. So basically the fair company paid these farmers a stipend to bring their animals to the fair and put them on display in order to retain any kind of agricultural flavor to the fair which we did right up until the end. It is unfortunate, I think, that agriculture is basically dead in Connecticut from the scale it used to be but everything changes.

TB: Did Mr. Leahy belong like to the Connecticut Fair Association?

JS: The Fair belonged to the Connecticut Fair Association and we were of course the largest fair. No other fair ever approached our size in Connecticut.

TB: Now I understand there was monies available to fairs. And I understand Danbury never sought money from the state?

JS: There was some money. I think a small stipend perhaps a \$1,000 a fair was available. Mr. Leahy valued his independence and we had no big civic fair board that operated this like most of the fairs have a board, usually full of volunteers that get together put their fair together and he was the board basically. All the decisions were his and he didn't want any politicians or any government or anybody else interfering with his decisions. It was his fair grounds. It was not a quasi-governmental thing like most of the state fairs are. He put all his money in it. We paid all the taxes that were due. It was not a non-profit organization and sometimes unintentionally it was. But basically he ran it as an independent company and it paid its way. So that is why he didn't accept any outside money from anybody.

TB: Did he also belong to a national organization?

JS: Yeah. There was the, I think, the National Association of Fairs and Expositions and he was the New England representative, Director they called him to that organization.

TB: Do you know about when?

JS: He was involved in that to my knowledge from probably in the mid-50s to his death. They have a convention every year in Chicago at the Sherman House Hotel in Chicago and he would, it started the day after Thanksgiving, so we would have Thanksgiving dinner at his house, the whole family and then the next day he would get on the train in Harmon, New York and would do an overnigher to Chicago. I think it was on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Limited and he would take his movie film projector with him and he always presented a speech about the Danbury Fair to the other fair executives from all over the country. None of their fairs were like the Danbury Fair. They were all run by big state boards and they were primarily agricultural and when they had an improvement it was maybe a new sign or something and our improvements were just constant and many every summer and he always amazed everybody at the way he operated his fair. So he did this presentation at their convention every year. Couldn't wait to do it and the room was always full. Everybody came to see John Leahy's presentation. He was plain spoken and he was humorous and everybody enjoyed listening to him and watching the films that he had taken every year. So that was quite a bit of fun. I was privileged to go with him the last couple of times he went and basically carried his bags and his projector but I got to see all the goings on. It was a big trade show like any other industrial trade shows except it was full of carnival rides and carnival games, and concession materials and everything that was new that year and of course you got to sample all the food items and what not that hit the fair the next season. So that was a lot of fun.

TB: That is very interesting. Last night I was watching the history channel and they mentioned about freak shows. The history of freak shows. Did in any of your years, I don't remember anything like that at the Danbury Fair. Were there any like that over the years?

JS: Oh yeah. The carnival brought the freak shows in and I remember them when I was a kid. Basically, that was old time entertainment.

TB: Right, right.

JS: And the carnival came in with all kinds of bizarre things in order to basically fleece the public. A lot of the freaks were certainly real and yeah, there were freak shows at the Danbury fairs basically right up until almost until when Fred and I started management. We kind of ended it. Times had changed.

TB: They said about in the 70s...

JS: Right. They had faded out. It is a good and a bad thing. These were people, most of them were deformed. These were basically unfortunate people who had handicaps and today because of political correctness, I guess, they would be tried to be rehabilitated and try to get some kind of a job somewhere in industry or not depending on the point to which they could perform. Basically, these people joined the carnival and supported themselves. They were not a burden to anybody.

TB: That's right.

JS: So if you look at it from that point of view, there wasn't anything wrong with it. It was completely voluntary. They found a way to make a living. They found a carnival family that would accept them for who they were and what they were and were not a burden on society. They may have been very hard to look at and in today's consciousness it may be impossible thing to deal with but that was the history of freaks for many, many years. So there is 2 sides to every story.

TB: Did you, were these the same people or is it the same show that would come to Danbury or is it they contacted you?

JS: For many years, the carnival was always the same show. Basically, the management made a deal with the carnival operator. As long as it was successful, they came in year after year. Sometimes the ownership of the carnival changed and so the name changed but it would basically be the same outfit. When Fred Fern and myself began to operate the management and we looked at it in quite a bit more businesslike manner, I have to say and studied the operations of other fairs and carnivals around, we decided to book most of the rides independently and the carnival we had been using had fallen behind in its standards of appearance and cleanliness that we wanted to present. So we went around to different amusement parks and picked and chose different rides and ride operators to

come to the fair. And basically I took over the task of laying out the carnival on the fair grounds every year so where the rides went, and how they were powered, the generators and all that sort of thing. And we ran what you would call an independent midway for the last several years of the fair. Which cleaned up the rides, allowed us to get new rides in all the time as they became available which the old carnival operator didn't perhaps own or invest in. So we were able to do that and we were able to increase our revenue the same way because we knew we shared in the ticket sales.

TB: It sounds like a lot more work?

JS: It was a lot more work but it was well worth it. The old carnival, typical of any kind of a subcontractor, they cry all the time about how poorly they are doing and every time you tried to raise their rent, they moaned about it. Well, we were able to find out about exactly what their income was and control the ticket sales and take a fair share in order to continue the success of the fair which of course got more and more and more expensive to operate like everything else. At the same time, we needed to do some off-season things besides the races and the fair. If we had a rainy fair week, we could be basically wiped out for the year because we had put all our chickens in one basket at that point, all our eggs in one basket.

TB: This week has been great (weather).

JS: This week has been great. Every once in a while though you would lose one or two weekends to the weather and so we began to diversify our use of the fairgrounds and we ran an Arts and Crafts Show from, I think, 1975-1981 when the fair finally closed. My wife, Carol and I, basically did that. We had juried all the craftsmen and artists that came in and we put together a nice little craft show which we ran one weekend every summer. It always seemed like the hottest weekend in July that we operated that. We ran a series of antique shows one summer. And assorted different things in order to try to spread the risk and increase the income of the fair. And those were always successful. We had a great location. People knew where the fair grounds was and what it was and we had a good reputation for operating good shows and the shows we operated even though each one was a different genre, they were always successful. So it was a good thing.

TB: Do you know anything of the old, old history of the fair, before Mr. Leahy?

JS: I know some of it.

TB: Wasn't there a board in the beginning? Wasn't there a board of men that ran it?

JS: Originally, it was Samuel Rundle, the father, operated the Ridgewood Stock Farm. And the Ridgewood Stock Farm was a horse breeder of race horses and a lot of the hatting manufacturers and entrepreneurs in Danbury were interested in horse racing. We're talking about the 1860s now and their horses went on the racing circuit and they followed them and ran their horses and for better or worse to see how they did.

TB: These were sulkies, right? These were sulkies or were they also flats?

JS: I think they were both.

TB: Really.

JS: Anyway, Samuel Rundle got together with some of the other guys that were interested in town and there was a sort of a training track over where the fairgrounds was and they got together and built a real horse race track and a grandstand over there in order to have some of the racing circuit come to Danbury so they could have a home track and not travel so far and there was a great rivalry between the Hilltop Farm up on Clapboard Ridge and Mr. Rundle's Farm which is where the Ridgewood Country Club is now which was called the Ridgewood Stock Farm at the time. And there was great interest in especially in those 2 farms in their horses so they started in 1869 on the site of the fairgrounds with their horse race track.

TB: Now, is the Hilltop Farm where the Danbury High School is now?

JS: It may be. I am not sure what the location of it was.

TB: Because there used to be a farm there.

JS: Well, that was probably it.

TB: I mean there were a lot of farms around but where Danbury High School is now, that is what the property was in the 60s and they turned it into the high school.

JS: Right. I am not exactly sure of the location but I understand it was up on Clapboard Ridge. Like I said, there was a great rivalry. So they put the race track together. And within months after they started racing, a number of other gentlemen around town approached them and said why don't we put a fair on here as part of this? And they all agreed and so they did. They formed the Danbury Farmers and Manufacturers Association and they operated their first fair in the Fall of 1869 and they operated that up until WW II when they had to close down basically because of rationing.

TB: Didn't they store cars on the property to gain some income?

JS: During the war?

TB: During the war.

JS: They rented out the building known as Machinery Hall to the Basset Company from Bridgeport who had some kind of machine defense operation and they operated there.

They boarded horses there on an annual basis and I think they may have rented out to store other things there in the buildings. The buildings were big empty buildings all the

rest of the year and they were desperate for any kind of income. So they did some rental operations during WW II but the income was never sufficient to really support the place.  
TB: Do you know the names of these old people who helped Sam Rundle start?

JS: I can look all this up.

TB: I just thought if you knew? (Tape 1 ends)

## **TAPE 2 OF 2**

JS: I have an awful busy summer and haven't had a chance to work on it. She has all the details of all those. I have the old ledgers to speak of, just hold this, of the Board of Directors and what not. Are we on yet? Some of the names that I can remember besides Samuel Rundle were of course his son Jim Mortimor Rundle, who they called Morty. There was John W. Bacon. There was J. Moss Ives, George Nevius. And these names of course stretch over a period of about 90 years or so, I don't know exactly what order they were in. C. Stewart McLean, Mr. Vreeland. I think he might have been Henry. And there were other of course a lot of department heads and what not over the years but those were some of the principal names that I can remember and may not, in particular, they may not have been contemporaries of each other because it did stretch over some 80 years amongst them but an awful lot of these people were prominent Danbury entrepreneurs and well known people that participated on the fair board year after year and were very enthused to do so. But Mr. Rundle, both Mr. Rundles, were the controlling people and basically ran the fair and I think an awful lot of these other gentlemen were more figureheads than anything else but come fair week everybody had their little niche that they operated and made the fair run.

TB: Was it your life?

JS: The fair was really the focus of my whole life. As a tyke, I lived on the fair grounds. After I got married, my wife and I lived in a little house on the edge of the big parking lot for 5 years and I took care of Mr. Leahy's animals morning and night. I plowed the snow over there for 5 years while we lived there. And I operated a beer stand there for 3 or 4 years that my father had up until the point when he passed away. And I had been involved in the fair my whole life. One of the big disappointments to me, in my life, was the fact that it had to be sold at the end. I had always thought that I was going to get to operate it myself. Mr. Leahy had always promised me that I would but unfortunately sometimes the actions and words don't match up. It was an extremely sad thing for me to see the fair sold and it was an entire change in my lifestyle that the Fair, like I said, was the focus of our lives 24 hours a day and we lived it all year long, planning for it, and working at it and seeing it happen every year. So it was an extremely sad thing to see it go. So I am certainly in concert with most of the older members of the Danbury community who miss it.

One of the other things that happened in 1969 besides the death of Mr. Jarvis was the members of the Danbury Airport Commission which is immediately adjacent to the fair grounds property wanted desperately to expand the runway across our major parking lot and basically try to take our property through eminent domain.

TB: The whole thing or just this portion?

JS: They were going to take the parking lot. Without a parking lot we couldn't operate. And put a mile-long runway which would have extended out over St. Peter's cemetery which probably wouldn't have been acceptable anyway and they started a newspaper campaign and, I think, they were applying for government money in order to do this and they were saying that the Danbury Airport was the busiest airport in New England and not quite a publicity campaign to try and take over our parking lot. Interestingly enough we hired a gentleman who was kind of a rabble rouser named Dimitrius Cezani so that we could have an outsider come in and rattle cages here and try to get this effort stopped. Mr. Cezani came in and made contact with the members of the Airport Board, with members of the News Times who seemed to be supporting it and basically battled them. We started a big petition drive that we operated a booth at the fair grounds during fair week and sent a petition to the governor to stop this and the funniest thing was, we hired my kid brother who was in high school at the time and a buddy of his to sit at the airport and count the planes and at that time, all the airplanes had their registration numbers under their wings in large numbers so you can see them in order to take a census of just how busy this airport was and which airplanes were which. And they were claiming that they did all these hundreds of flights every day out of the airport which of course nobody had ever been aware of until they put these figures out in the newspaper. Anyway, my brother and his buddy sat there, I think, 2 weeks and they recorded every flight during daylight hours and there were no lights there yet out at the airport and we were able to find that the great majority of those flights were by the same five airplanes because they were teaching people to fly and all this tremendous volume of traffic was the same five airplanes doing takeoff and landing teaching their students. And of course we publicized that fact and I still have their great big yellow pads where they took these numbers and it is really quite comical in a sad sort of way. Anyway we defeated the proposal. We got the governments to back down on taking our parking lot and we were able to continue to operate.

TB: Now did they say they had other property though? That they would have exchanged property? Or was it just far away or something?

JS: I don't recall that. If the city had other property that they were going to exchange, it wouldn't have been close by and it wouldn't have been appropriate for our use and so basically we wanted to remain the way we were and operate the way we were and be left alone. So we were able to defeat that.

TB: Now, do you remember Lake Kenosia, the stories of the park that used to be up there?

JS: The Lake Kenosia was an amusement park.

TB: But didn't they have horses too?

JS: I don't believe so. They ran that as a summer amusement park. The history of amusement parks has to do with trolley car companies and to some extent the railroads. The trolley companies were very busy all week long and weekends they really had nothing to do but they still they were all horse drawn and they had to maintain, feed the horses and what not. A great many of these trolley companies and this was all across the nation, found out that if they can create an amusement park a couple of miles out of town, the people all lived in the cities in those days, people would pay to get on the trolley cars and go out to the amusement parks. Therefore the trolley cars had a double source of income. They owned and operated amusement parks and they also were able to run the trolleys on Sundays and get revenue for them. And that in fact, I understand, is how Lake Kenosia Amusement Park started.

TB: And that was after the Fair, I believe?

JS: I don't know when it exactly started but it ran concurrently with the Fair for many, many years and there was a trolley line from the center of town, down Backus Avenue, down Kenosia Avenue directly to the Park and that was really the only thing that it was used for. Mr. Jarvis' father, William Jarvis, was one of the principals with another gentleman whose name I could look up and they operated the amusement park for many, many years and that's how Irv Jarvis got his background in the carnival business and the amusement park business and then became associated with Mr. Leahy. By then, the Kenosia Park was defunct. So that was the story behind that.

TB: Thank you very, very much. I appreciate it.

JS: It was 1916 that the grandstand burned down. And I then think it burned down again, in fact I know it burned down again in the 20s. Cause the new concrete one was built in, I think about 1928. The Dolan Construction Company built it from Bethel. So that was interesting.

JS: ...race a race horse out there over a measured mile and the bicycle won.

TB: Wow, that must have been what at the turn of the century?

JS: That was all around pre-WW I and shortly thereafter for the most part.

This was the caretakers farmhouse and the caretaker lived there year round and operated a little farm and oversaw because of the horses being boarded there and that house is in every photograph I have ever seen no matter how old the pictures are of the fair. So they must have built that right away after they put the track together.

TB: That is interesting. THE END