



**Ruth Bernhardt**  
**ROBS History Project**  
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Ruth Bernhardt lives in Brentwood at 8 Winthrop Road with her husband George. They moved there in 1949, and it will be 50 years in October that they are living there. Ruth lived in Brentwood for 78 years having moved there when she was 3<sup>rd</sup> years old in 1921. Ruth was too young to remember, but her mother said that she cried a lot when they moved to Brentwood, because she didn't like it and wanted to go home but finally got past that. Ruth is one of 6 children, and they all attended Brentwood Schools. Ruth was born in South Ozone Park and was the 3<sup>rd</sup> child with 4 brothers and a sister. They are: William, Carl, who was a priest, Robert, Eleanor, and Walter who died when he was 15. Her younger sister Eleanor also worked in the Brentwood School District in the same building where Ruth worked. Ruth started there in 1954 and her sister in 1964.

Ruth remembered first starting school in Brentwood in 1925 when she was 5 years old. She said that there was no Kindergarten and that they walked a mile and a quarter to school. The school building was a brick structure that was attached to the front of the current Brentwood Library but was later demolished and a new building constructed in its place by the time Ruth graduated. The building she attended was a two-room schoolhouse with 4 classes in each room with grades 1-4 on one side and grades 5-8 on the other. She said they called it "the big room and the little room". Each teacher had 4 classes (grades) to teach. Ruth described the classroom as being large with big windows, oiled wooden floors, and the desks were permanently attached to the floor and had inkwells.

There were long benches in the front of the room where each class (grade) sat when it was their turn to receive instruction from the teacher.

Ruth was asked about her teachers. She remembered her first grade teacher, Mrs. Floyd who left when she got married. Her married name was Mrs. Mitchell. She later came back to the district when Ruth's son was in school, and he was in her 3rd grade class. She also remembered Mrs. Lee, Miss Hollow, and Mr. Burdick who was the teaching principal who had 2 children in school.

There was no high school in Brentwood, so the students were designated to attend the Central Islip High School. Ruth's father was an active member of the Brentwood School Board at the time and didn't want the Brentwood students to attend school in Central Islip, so they took the train to Farmingdale and attended the Farmingdale High School. The students had to walk to the Brentwood train station each morning and then from the Farmingdale train station to school. Ruth said that the Brentwood students were given a permanent late pass in the morning, because it was almost a mile's walk from the train station to the school. Ruth graduated from Farmingdale High School. Later a newer building was constructed in Brentwood-Bay Shore for the high school where Ruth's younger sister graduated. There were no snow days, and they had to walk even in the snow. The roads were not paved but were just dirt, including Washington Avenue. The area of Brentwood where Ruth lived did not have telephones or electricity. It was quite rural. Ruth recalled the names of several of her teachers in Farmingdale like Miss Norton, the science teacher and her homeroom teacher Mrs. Moyer.

Ruth's maiden name is Baker, and her nickname was Ruthie. She currently lives with her husband, and they have been married for 59 years. Ruth said, "*His name is George Frederick Bernhardt, and he is a wonderful man.*" They met in 1936, and Ruth's older brother was married to George's older sister. George was born and raised in Bay Shore. Ruth was attracted to him because "*he was just a great guy.*" Ruth was working as a Mother's Helper at her older brother's home in Bay Shore when he and his wife had their second child. Ruth met George one day when his mother had asked him to give Ruth a ride to her home from work.

Ruth's sister-in-law worked for the Brentwood School district as a secretary for the School Board when Ruth's father was the President of the Brentwood School Board. She was also active in the Bay Shore School District working as a secretary for the Superintendent after graduating from high school.

George enjoys fishing a lot. Both he and Ruth like boating and fishing. They get to go out to California to see their son and their grandchildren and great grandchildren at least once a year. Their son and daughter-in-law have two girls, Jill and Kim. Jill is married and has two youngsters, so Ruth and her husband are great grandparents. Jill is the older of the two grandchildren, is very bright, and works for Intel. Ruth's son, who is 57, was a fireman and took early retirement after having injured his back while working.

Ruth was then asked to speak about her parents. Her mother was born in Germany and came to the U.S. when she was 2 years old. She was a homemaker with 6 children to take care of. Her father was born in Brooklyn. They met and married in 1909 or 1910. They initially lived in South Ozone Park and had 4 children when they moved out to Brentwood. Ruth said that the move to Brentwood for her mother was a hardship, because in Ozone Park there were gaslights and gas stoves. In Brentwood they had no electricity or telephone. Her father was an electrician, so eventually they got a generator so they would have electricity. They had to walk half a mile from home to a neighbor's house to use their telephone. When they first moved in, they also did not have water. The town had to deliver it to them. Her father eventually dug a well and built a tower, and with the generator was able to have the water pumped up into the tower so they had running water in their home.

What did her mother like to do? Her mother loved gardening. She had a vegetable garden and canned many of the vegetables, so they would have them through the winter. She also liked flowers had a flower garden that she enjoyed tending. When Ruth got old enough to take over doing things, she also enjoyed working in the garden.

Her father worked as a superintendent in the Packard plant in Long Island City and commuted by train to work every day. Later on he owned his own

Electrical and Mechanic business with a partner in Bay Shore. When Ruth's older brother graduated from high school, he went to work with their father in his business. In 1932 during the depression, her father lost the business. When Ruth first moved to Brentwood, her father got involved with the fire department, and eventually he became a fire warden for the district and had his own fire truck. At that time Brentwood was all woods, and Ruth remembers one particular fire that came through the area where they lived, and the flames singed the feathers of some of the chickens they had in the back yard. There were several chicken farms in the area. Ruth's husband first started working for the Bay Shore Post Office and had what was known as "the rural route." He had to use his own automobile, and he delivered baby chicks that came in boxes through the mail to the farms. George's father had a farm at the site where the Mark County Day School is currently located. He raised pigs to slaughter for ham.

Ruth's father was very civic minded. He ran for a position in the School Board, and became President. At that time it was the School Board that met with the teachers and hired them.

How did Ruth come to work for the Brentwood School District? In 1954 the district was so overcrowded that they decided to build 2 new schools, one in the Southwest area and one in the Northeast area. Ruth called Lee Stewart, whom she had known when he was a principal at the time she and her siblings attended school, and said she was interested in working in the Brentwood School District at Northeast. She was interviewed by him and was offered the front office secretarial position. Ralph Saiken was hired as the principal for that new building, and on the opening day of the school could not be there, because his mother had just passed away, and he was sitting Shiva. Ruth had to work alone the first day without the principal. She said, *"Here I am a novice opening the school, but somehow we got through it."* The building wasn't finished, and the men were still working inside with scaffolding and other building materials. For the first few weeks, the students would enter the building, and they would take attendance and then just put them on the bus to go back home. The telephones were not yet set up, and if they needed a phone especially to call down to the Village School, the secretaries would have to go out to the workman's shanties to use theirs. The only other

school at the time was the Village School. Ruth said that is where her son attended high school until the Ross building was built some time in the early 60's.

In September 1954 when Northeast School opened, Ruth said there were 14 staff members, and in 1955 they went on split session, because they were overcrowded. Grades 2, 4 and 6 were on split session, and they had to hire more teachers. Ruth remembered working with Marie Grasso who later married and became Marie Gerolom. She was hired as a 1st grade teacher and had also attended the Brentwood schools. She had gone to school with Ruth's younger sister. Mr. Sonderling was still in Brentwood when Ruth started working there.

Where did Ruth get her secretarial skills? She said that she had taken typing and shorthand in high school, because she knew she wanted to work in business. Her first job using these skills was during the depression time when she was hired to work in the NYA (National Youth Administration) that was located in the old Islip Town Hall. Prior to this her first paying job was as a mother's helper where she would live in the homes where she worked. Her first year working at Northeast, she earned \$1800 a year. At the time, the principals were earning \$5000 a year. She also worked for Craft in Farmingdale that turned into Republic just before the war started. She also worked in Bay Shore for the Division of Old Age Assistance.

Did Ruth have any memories of the beginning of World War II? Ruth said that she was afraid that her husband would get drafted. At the time he had been working for the post office for about 10 or 15 years. She had just left work at Republic to raise their first child, and her husband was given a deferment from the draft because of that. But, that didn't last long. Since they only had the one child, her husband was eventually inducted into the Service going in the same day as Ruth's younger brother, Carl who had later become a priest. On March 17, 1944 they were both shipped out to Camp Upton, located in Yaphank, NY. Because her husband had experience in the Post Office, he was sent to Postal School, and her brother was sent into the infantry. Her brother was missing in action in The Battle of the Bulge and wound up a prisoner of war. Ruth's father had a short wave radio and would stay up all night listening in hoping to hear news of his son. Any news that he did hear of others, he would call their family

members and relate the news. When her brother Carl finally did come back, it was his experience overseas that influenced him to go into the ministry. He went back to work at Republic where he had been before being drafted and studied nights to become a priest. He is retired now and lives out East in Cutchogue.

Ruth was asked if she remembered the day the war ended. She responded, *“Oh, yes, yes...VJ Day and also with the Japanese.” “We were very fortunate also my husband, I had told you, went to Postal School, and then he was going to be shipped out... we didn’t know where to...no one knew that. I went down to see him in Petersburg, Virginia and visit him for a little while and came home. I was living with my mother and father. He was then shipped out, but fortunately he was shipped out here to New York, and he worked in the APO in New York for the while he was in the service. He wasn’t shipped overseas. So we were lucky, but of course it cost us money for him to commute, but at least I had him here where a lot of other people didn’t.”*

Ruth was then asked if she had chores as a youngster. *“Oh, yes, that’s what’s wrong with the children today. I didn’t say that we went at them so willingly. You had to be prompted to do that. My job was to do the dishes, which I hated. We had a kerosene stove and you had to...somebody had to... fill that little gallon kerosene thing every day after school. During Depression time, and this was even after we were married, to be able to get coal for your domestic hot water, we used a little pot-bellied stove. We used to pick the good coal out of the ashes. In fact my father had this ingenious thing that he made where you took all the ashes and dumped them in to this thing that you would grind and the old stuff would come out and the good stuff fell to the bottom.”*

Does Ruth have one season that she prefers over the others? *“Spring.” “I look forward to the spring. I love the fall, but it’s a sad time of the year to me, although it is beautiful. We spent a lot of our days up in New England at that time of the year with changing color that we like. We had friends up there.”*

Ruth said she is a morning person and always has been. Her husband gets up early too, even though he’s retired and doesn’t have to. Ruth gets up early every morning to take her walk with her sister.

She then was asked to speak some more about her memories of Brentwood in the past. Where did they go to do their shopping? Ruth said in Kohler's General Store. On First Avenue there was the firehouse, the Kohler's General Store and the post office. Everything was done there. Ruth knew the Kohler family well...Mrs. Kohler's father, who owned the store first, Connie and Flo. Flo Kohler was a teacher to Ruth's younger brothers. She was a "newcomer" to Brentwood School. Flo started teaching in Brentwood in September of 1932. That's when Lee Stewart was a principal.

Are there any things that Ruth misses about the old days? She missed her family being as close as they were. Ruth said that they were a very close family when her parents were alive. Now it is just she, her sister and her brother. She doesn't see her brother that often, but she sees her sister every day when they go walking together in the morning morning. She doesn't miss the fact that they didn't have a lot of things growing up. She remembered a friend of hers, an only child, who didn't have to share everything like Ruth had to do. Her friend could afford things that Ruth couldn't have.

When Ruth was working in Brentwood, she spent most of the years in Northeast. There was a time when she had to go down to help Mr. Stewart's secretary do the Payroll for the District that was all done on typewriters. She remembered when the computers first came in. Once a year, they would be given a box full of computer keypunch cards for their school, and they had to check them by hand against their own records that were on index cards. It was a tedious chore.

There was no formal union or organization for the clericals, so they used to meet informally at each other's homes . . . a network of sticking together. There was one secretary for each building. They then had CSEA that later changed to a Brentwood organization that helped working towards improving their salaries. Ruth is a member of ROBS and affiliated with NYSUT, although she is not entitled to any of the benefits of NYSUT. She does receive the NYSUT Newsletters.

Are there certain memorable days or experiences that she remembers during the time she worked in Brentwood? When she started working in Brentwood, the staff consisted of 14 people, and they were like one little family. Even as the district grew, Ruth said it still felt like a family. *“We grew from that little picture of Ralph Saiken and his crew of 13 to larger group school pictures.* Ruth worked for 24 years there. She had worked for a year and a half at Pilgrim State Hospital when she was in the typing pool, so she had 25 years with the State.

What brought her to the decision to retire? She retired in 1978 and was looking forward to retirement. She retired at age 60, so she was penalized with social security having not waited until she was 62. Her husband retired 6 years before her and was home. At first she thought financially she would have to do part time work after retiring, so as a retirement gift, her colleagues gave her a self-correcting typewriter. But she and her husband *“tightened their belts a little”*, and she didn't have to work.

She is enjoying her retirement, because she and her husband enjoy doing the same things together. They did some traveling to Bermuda and Nassau. They also took several automobile trips in the United States. They would visit their son who had moved to California. They try and take a yearly visit there. Because of the distance, they miss their grandchildren and great grandchildren growing up. They are ages 6 and 9. Their older great granddaughter writes to them on a regular basis. They also email each other back and forth. When their granddaughter was visiting Ruth and her husband, she bought them a computer and set them up so they could keep in touch through email. Ruth and her husband are taking adult education courses to continue learning computer skills. *“In 1967 my husband and I drove a car to California for a friend of one of the teachers at Northeast school, because I was so devastated that my son and daughter-in-law left. Everybody knew that they were gone, and if I could only get out there. I passed that word along...do you ever know someone who wants their car driven one way, that's what we would do.”* So, with no plans Ruth and her husband drove to California to see their son and Daughter-in-law. *“We got stuck in Gillette, Wyoming...never even heard of the town before. We burned out a valve in this new car, and we wound up in some cowboy country where they fixed*



*this car for us. We had to wait for them to send for a part from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and they sent it by bus, so we had to wait for the part to come to fix, so it cut short our vacation with our children.”* They then took the plane and flew home.

Does she miss anything about not working? *“It did take a couple of months to adjust to being retired, but I think everybody finds that.”*

She was asked if there was any reason that she chose to stay in Brentwood, and she said it was because the better part of her family was there. *“The biggest part of my family was here, and it would be a tossup; Do you want to be with youngsters who might move from here to there to everywhere, and we couldn’t follow them around always, or be here with that part of the family that we grew up with. It was a hard decision to make. I always figured that stuff was in God’s Hands.”*

What are some of the best things about the Brentwood community that Ruth can comment on? She’s not so involved with the community now at the present moment, but her memories are how the community was years ago. *“Everybody working together...everybody knew each other...the neighbors ... the people you went to school with...the people who helped you. Brentwood was a small town America. Now you are like a stranger in your own hometown...even on your own street where you lived...so many have either moved away or passed away. Not that you are not friendly with the people who have moved in but it’s more of a ‘Hi, goodbye’ type thing. That’s the way life is today.*