

Memories of Wilmot with Clara Louise Bigelow Langley

Transcript

01/04/19

Lindy Heim: [October 2018] I'm Lindy Heim, from the Wilmot Historical Society, and I'm here today standing in front of our famous and award-winning library here in Wilmot Center. This building was also the place where Clara Langley taught her students, way back when. She's going to tell you about all that in the video to come.

Lindy Heim: This is Lindy Heim and Marc Davis visiting Clara Langley today and the date is December 15, 2009. We're at Clara's home and we're going to just talk about the old days.

Clara Langley: Yup.

Lindy: What year were you born?

Clara: 1918.

Lindy: Ah ha! And so how old are you today?

Clara: I will be 62 in June. I'm still 61 for now.

Lindy: You're 61?

Clara: 61. (laughs) 91.

Lindy: There you go!

Clara: My brains are not working.

Lindy: No, no – that's okay – not to worry. Where did you live when you were growing up?

Clara: Oh, I lived all over the state of Maine.

Lindy: Where did you start out?

Clara: On Chebeague Island.

Lindy: So, you moved around with your family?

Clara: Yes. My father was a Methodist minister and you know how Methodist ministers used to move. My father was Earl Wilbur Bigelow. She was Erma Fellows Bigelow. My father was born in 1889 and my mother was born in 1894.

Lindy: And whereabouts were they born? Do you know?

Clara: My father and all his family were from Massachusetts. My mother was born in Fayette, Maine, and lived there until she married my father. My grandfather Bigelow lived with us for years, and I remember him a lot of time. He had one thing in common

with my husband, he loved to cut wood. My husband was in the wood business for years.

Lindy: So how did they meet? Do you remember?

Clara: My father was preaching in the town that my mother was going to high school in.

Lindy: What year did they marry? Do you have an idea?

Clara: 1917.

Lindy: Did your mom have a career?

Clara: She was a supply minister...after a while. She didn't...she was just a stay-at-home mother for years. But she took some conference centers and got to be a supply minister.

Lindy: I'm not familiar what a supply minister is.

Clara: An unordained minister. A minister that preaches, but they're not really a full-fledged minister.

Lindy: Ha. That's an interesting term.

Clara: Yeah.

Marc Davis: Do they fill in for other people?

Clara: They fill in for other people or sometimes they hold a little church for themselves.

Marc: Would it be like an assistant or like a visiting teacher?

Clara: Yes.

Lindy: And did you say you knew something about where your grandparents were born?

Clara: Well I know where my grandfather Bigelow was born, I mean grandfather Fellows was born. He was born in Fayette, Maine, same as my mother was. Had farmers in the family for years and years and years, since back before the Revolutionary War.

Lindy: It's easy to remember one town, because that's where they all were.

Clara: That's right. They all came from Fayette, Maine.

Lindy: So, they were farmers?

Clara: Yes.

Lindy: On both sides?

Clara: My father's father was a carpenter, but back along there everything I can think of was horse thieves. That's what my grandfather used to say. He never wanted his genealogy traced, because he said he was afraid they'd find too many horse thieves. I think what he was really afraid of is that they'd find that too many of the family were Tories during the Revolutionary War, because he was intensely patriotic, and he didn't like the idea that a large amount of his family were Tories*.

*The term Tory or "Loyalist" was used in the American Revolution for those who remained loyal to the British Crown. – Wikipedia

Lindy: Do you have brothers or sisters?

Clara: I have one brother.

Lindy: And is he alive today?

Clara: Yes.

Lindy: What do you remember about growing up with him?

Clara: We were the best of friends. Instead of a sibling rivalry, we were each other's best buddy.

Marc: What's your brother's name?

Clara: Harold.

Marc: Is he named after anybody in the family?

Clara: Yes, he was named after my mother's brother who died. My grandmother Fellows lost her first one and his name was Harold. And my father's family also lost their first one and his name was Wallace. And my brother was Harold Wallace after the two of them.

Marc: Oh.

Lindy: Were you named after anybody in particular?

Clara: I was named after my father's mother who died fairly young. She was exactly Clara Louise Bigelow, just like I was.

Marc: Does your brother still live over in Fayette?

Clara: No, my brother lives in Harrington, Maine. If you know where that is, your good, it's way, way over in Washington County almost over to the jumping-off place.

Lindy: Is there a particularly happy time that you remember when you were young?

Clara: When I was young, up until I reached my teens, everything was happy. I enjoyed life tremendously until I reached my teens. And I was a misfit of the teens.

Lindy: How was that?

Clara: Well, mostly that I wanted to stay a child, and I was no longer a child. The only sad time was that we would move around so much and I didn't like leaving the place where I'd been living before behind me.

I played all the sports that were offered, which was basketball and baseball and that was all. When I was a kid, I played baseball and I played basketball. I played basketball in high school. I didn't play basketball in college, because they didn't have intramural sports in college then. They didn't have title something or other whatever it was that brought women's sports.

Marc: Title Nine.

Clara: Yeah, [Title Nine brought] women's sport into colleges. Now they're just as intramural as the boys.

Marc: Where did you go to college?

Clara: I went to University of Maine.

Marc: Up at Bangor?

Clara: Orono. It's just above Bangor.

Lindy: Where did you go to elementary school?

Clara: All over the state of Maine.

Marc: Was there one place that you remember best of all?

Clara: Yes, Franklin. Franklin, Maine, not Franklin, New Hampshire.

Marc: Why was that?

Clara: Well, we stayed there longer than we did most any place for one thing, and for another I loved that school.

Marc: Did you have a good teacher?

Clara: We had two good teachers. One in the lower grade room, one the upper grade room, and they were sisters and they were beautiful. I mean they were beautiful to look at. Brown curly hair, brown eyes. And they were very good and very fair, and they made me work, when any other place, any other teachers that they had, well my first-grade teacher made me work, but most of the places I was, the teachers did not keep me busy. The way I sailed through high school was pitiful.

Lindy: So, in grade school, you were a two-grade school?

Clara: I went to a two-grade school, yes.

Lindy: Wow!

Clara: In first grade, I was in a one-room school with all eight grades. We had grades one to four downstairs and grades five to eight upstairs. Two sisters teaching it.

Marc: Do you remember their names?

Clara: Julia and Elizabeth White.

Lindy: Was it common to have schools with two grade levels like that?

Clara: That was the most common thing in the state of Maine in those days. Both Springfield and Grantham had that kind of schools.

Lindy: I'm sure it was not dissimilar in New Hampshire. About what time was that, what years was that that you were in elementary school?

Clara: In the late twenties, very early thirties.

Marc: Where you finally graduate from high school?

Clara: Harrington, Maine.

Lindy: Were there many kids in each grade level?

Clara: A handful. My high school class had eight people. My brothers had 12, and that was a big class for Harrington High School.

Lindy: How'd you get there? Did you walk?

Clara: We walked. I never rode around the school until I was a teacher. One place where I taught, we had to ride the bus.

Lindy: What was the school day like? You walked to school. Did you bring your lunch?

Clara: No, we walked, we went home for lunch. Once in a while we brought our lunch if my folks were away or if it was an awful rainy day or something like that. But most the time we went home to lunch.

Marc: Even in the cold weather?

Clara: Yes. Cold didn't bother us any. We were outdoors, I can remember being outdoors playing when it was forty below...and the wind was blowing. And a little boy that was playing with us, a friend of my brother's, was wearing steel rim glasses. Kids

wore steel rims in those days. He frostbit his cheeks right under those steel rim glasses it was so cold.

Lindy: So, you arrived, you get all your gear off, if it was winter...

Clara: Yeah.

Lindy: And you put it...

Clara: In the coat room.

Lindy: In the coat room, and then you'd settle into your desk.

Clara: Yup.

Lindy: Then what would happen?

Clara: Oh, we'd salute the flag, and say the Lord's Prayer, and sing a few songs. Then if you were in one of the very lowest grades you did your reading first, but most of the grades did their arithmetic first.

Lindy: You'd break for lunch. You'd come back.

Clara: Yep.

Lindy: And did you do lighter subject matter in the afternoons?

Clara: Oh, we did history and geography. Way down in the very early grades you did reading and spelling and things like that, but once you got in the eighth grade, they taught you in history and geography. Health. We didn't have science, that came along after I was teaching. We had health. English grammar, of course, and learned how to conjugate verbs and all that sort of stuff, which I hated. I always hated English anyway, no matter what. Whether it was grammar, or literature, or what it was, I hated English.

Marc: (Laughs) What was your favorite subject?

Clara: Math!

Marc: Math? What about math? Tell us about math.

Clara: Well, I didn't go as far in math as I would have been able to if I had the chance to major in math. But I had to major in education. So, I didn't get all the math courses I could have.

Lindy: And why was that?

Clara: Money. There was nothing I couldn't do in math.

Marc: Algebra?

Clara: Algebra, geometry, trigonometry. I never had the chance to take calculus. I have a gift for math.

Marc: Did you like to teach it?

Clara: No. I could never figure out why they're having so much trouble. It was my favorite subject to study and my least favorite subject to teach. And I never could figure out why they were having so much trouble with math, because it came so easy to me. My mother was good at math. My brother was good at math.

Lindy: How did you and your husband meet?

Clara: I came down here to Wilmot to teach school. There was a man down here that was the janitor of the school. We got to talking, and he wanted to know something he can do for me and I said, "Yeah, find me a husband," just joking along, and he said, "I know just the one for you!" And he brought Frank down and introduced him to me, and we started dating right then and there. A little over a year afterwards, we were married. That was meant to be.

Lindy: When did you marry?

Clara: 1951.

Lindy: And you had children?

Clara: Yes.

Lindy: How many?

Clara: Three.

Lindy: Do you know their birthdates?

Clara: Louise was born April 14th, 1952, and Ronnie was born May 4th, 1954, and Nancy was born September 4th, 1957. I have three grandchildren, but I have five great-grandchildren already.

Marc: Where were you teaching school then?

Clara: Down here in Wilmot Center, where the library is now.

Lindy: Were you the last teacher there?

Clara: No. Well, there were several after me. They made the school district here a little bit different, so that school was just the upper grades and the Wilmot Flat School was just the lower grades. I think Mrs. Cobden was the last teacher to teach in the Center School down here.

Lindy: So, what year was it that they made those changes?

Clara: Let's see, I got done there in 1951, it'd be about 1954 that they made those changes. I was on the school board then. I was only on the school board three years. That was all I wanted. That was where all the turmoil was. It was all the school board I wanted.

Lindy: Were you living right here when you did?

Clara: I hadn't moved up here, but I was teaching in Wilmot. No. I boarded down at the Wilmot Center.

Lindy: Do you remember when trains were the main transportation around here?

Clara: Heavens yes! It's still my favorite method of transportation. I remember the man, the station agent, down at Potter Place with a moustache! (Laughs)

Lindy: And how did you get there from here?

Clara: Somebody took me down.

Lindy: Okay. There wasn't transportation from the old general store? That was too modern.

Clara: That's right

Lindy: Yeah, but in the old days there was a stage.

Clara: That's right. In the old days, there was a stage. But the days of the stage were gone by the time I came to this area.

Lindy: That's right.

Marc: When you came from college how did you get to Wilmot?

Clara: Well I taught a lot of places, and I wanted to get a place that was near the railroad, and I wrote to the superintendent of schools in Salisbury, which is right on the railroad. But I didn't get my wish to be near enough to the railroad, so I didn't have to have transportation to get to the train.

Lindy: How about shops in the village?

Clara: We had stores. We didn't have any shops, the mills were all gone, but we had stores. There was a store down here at the Center for quite a while. And then there was Szilagyi's Store up the road a little way.

Lindy: What kind of store was that?

Clara: Groceries.

Lindy: Okay. And the first one you mentioned?

Clara: That was the same thing. A number of different people run it but was groceries. For a little while, when I first came here, they had gas pumps there. But she didn't pay her bills too well and they took her gas pump out. So, then we had to go to Wilmot Flat to get gas and eventually to Elkins to get gas.

Lindy: Where was the gas station in the Flat?

Clara: Where the post office is now.

Lindy: Because that was a general store.

Clara: That was a general store.

Lindy: Wasn't there one before that where the apartment building is now, on the corner of Village Road and Kearsarge Valley Road?

Clara: Yes.

Lindy: Was that before your time?

Clara: I can just barely remember when there was a store there. We never went to that one much. We usually went to Cutler's where the post office is now.

Lindy: How about the churches? Were there as many churches as there are today?

Clara: There was one more, because when I came here the Methodist Church was up there on the top of the hill above Campbells. They didn't have services there very often, but they did once in a while.

Marc: It burned. Do you remember when that burned?

Clara: Yes. 1957. It was struck by lightning.

Lindy: Was R. P. Johnson's around?

Clara: R. P. Johnson's was down by where it used to be, before they came up on the main road.

Marc: Up by the covered bridge there.

Clara: Yes. When I first came there, you had to go through that covered bridge to get to Cilleyville. That's where the road went. Curved all around by where the Fox Farm was. And then there was another feed mill, Clough, but no relation to Dr. Clough, had a feed mill on the Shindagan Road, near where the brook crosses there.

[November 2018]

On November 30, 2018, Judy Hauck gathered a few of Clara's friends, at the Wilmot Public Library, to reminisce about Clara.

Judy Hauck: I'd like to introduce you to Fred Ogmundson, Carol MacDonald, and Mary Jane Ogmundson.

Carol MacDonald: My husband and I came to Wilmot in about, the late '60s, I think it was 1968. We were both teachers and Clara and Frank had three kids, Louise, Ronnie, and Nancy, so we had the kids in school, because they were neighbors. So, we got to know the kids, as well as Frank and Clara, quite well over the years. Frank always cut wood, and he cut wood for us. So, we always had the relationship back and forth.

When my kids were little, the oldest one was in school, but I had two little ones at home, and I was teaching part-time, and I needed someone to stay at the house with these two beautiful children. It's hard to find sitters and usually you have to pack them up and take extra clothes and stuff. So, I spoke to Clara and I said, 'Would you like to stay with these two kids?' I taught an eight o'clock class, but I was usually home at noon time. And she said, "Sure."

So, I could get up in the morning and get ready for school, and one might be in bed, one might be having breakfast, one might be in pajamas, and she would come down and I would say, "He hasn't eaten, she's not dressed," – no problem – I could just walk out the door. It was terrific.

When I got home, her job, she always viewed her job as it was time to read and play with the kids. So, when I got home, sometimes my living room would look like a campout. Chairs were tipped, blankets were over them, and the kids would be like, 'Oh, your home?'

As Clara got older, I would try to visit, and she was one of the few people that as you visit it was always easy, because all you had to do was mention teaching and she would come out with a story. 'Well, when I was teaching, we did this...' The other thing, I grew up in the state of Maine. Clara grew up in the state of Maine, way, way down the coast. So, I would mention Bar Harbor or some place in Maine and. 'Well I lived there for a while.' Arcadia National Park. When she was a kid, her family would go there camping, and this was years ago, and there's all these bike trails. And one thing she remembered was that they would take their bikes, she and her brother, and they would just bike all over. And it was fascinating, they loved going there.

She was a good resource as far as Wilmot, because she had history. She had a lot of history with the library, because she remembered using the library when it was up over the Town Hall. In fact, she said to me, 'I gave them most of the books that they had there.' Because she cleaned out her shelves.

Fred Ogmundson: Frank's ancestors, I think they went all the way back to Blacksmith Andrew Langley, they were at least three generations before Frank, so she [Clara] married into Wilmot history.

At Old Home Day church services, Clara was the traditional gift-giver. There are four gifts given: to the person who had come the farthest for that service on Old Home Day, and the oldest person there, and the youngest person, and the largest family there. So,

in the middle of this conventional, you would break and say, 'Now Clara Langley will present the day's awards.' And suddenly the whole mood was changed, because Clara would adopt this very theatrical manner, with a voice that rose and fell and rose and fell. She was quite dramatic in doing this. It must have been hard for the minister to bring the service back.

[October 2018]

Lindy: Eight years after interviewing Clara Langley with Marc Davis, I am standing in the very building where Clara Langley taught her classes.

Outside is where the children had recess every day and presently, the building houses the Town of Wilmot's award-winning library, a wonderful reuse of an historic Wilmot Center building.

Not far from this spot, across Route 4A and up at the crook of Bunker Hill Road, where the family home is located, I remember being so impressed by Clara's ability to recall the details of her life during the interview at a time when she was 91.

The Wilmot Historical Society is very lucky to have had the opportunity to learn from Clara what life was like for her growing up in Maine, pursuing a career in teaching, and raising her family. The Town of Wilmot is also honored because she was the Boston Post Cane holder from June 22, 2013 to her death in 2015, and continues to benefit from her story through this recording.