

Walter Walker Transcript

Final edit June 11, 2020

Charles Thompson: It is April 28, 2011 and Lindy Heim and I, Charles Thompson, are here and visiting with Walter Walker with the Wilmot Historical Society hoping to be able to learn from Walter some of the important things in our past that we don't know about.

Charles: Could you tell us a little about your parents? Who they were. What their names were and when they were born?

Walter: Yes, my mother [Annie Walker] is a Wilmot girl and that's the reason I spent so much time here. My father [Frank Walker] had connections with Wilmot in that his ancestors were Langleys. But they were far enough back, so that I used to tease my father about marrying his own relatives. My mother was a very distant cousin of my father.

My father lived on the farm where his father lived, his grandfather lived, his great-grandfather lived, and where my son lives right now. My son Rusty is the sixth generation of Walkers to live on that farm.

My grandmother Langley, my mother's mother, who Charles Thompson is sitting in her chair right now, is an old, old Wilmot girl. Her parents lived on Cross Hill, in the house that was supposedly going to be restored, and the carpenter who was going to do it was a little slow, and by the time he got around to really doing anything it was beyond saving. So it eventually just fell down and there's nothing there now to show where the Langley's started.

Many of the Stearns and Ayres spent a lot of time in Wilmot when they were young. Stuart Bradley used to come up on Old Home Days, from down south, and he spent a lot of time here in Wilmot when he was a boy. He would come up and spend weeks and weeks with his cousins at the Langley's and with others. They all grew up together and it seemed like there was a connection with everybody. You had to be careful what you said, because if you didn't you would often find out who you are talking about a relative.

Charles: What did they do for work? What were their occupations?

Walter: I think of myself as being a skilled person, and I am in that respect, but I can't I can't touch a candle to what he did. He was a self-taught man in a lot of ways. He went to Proctor for one year, and he got sick of school and quit. But, he skied and he made his own skis as a teenager. He was a self-taught blacksmith. He was an excellent carpenter. Maude Swift, when I met her once at a benefit in the library, she remembered my father's

stairs, that he had built for her, and she said she would never forget those beautiful, beautiful stairs that Frank Walker built. He contracted a rare disease, right in the prime of his life, called Transverse Myelitis, which was much, much worse than polio, and it paralyzed him from the waist down. A lot of people died from the disease, but he fought back and eventually learned to walk and felt that he couldn't do carpenter work again. So, he raised poultry, and during the Second World War a man could make of a good living at that. We kids were old enough that we chipped in and helped on all of this. That was how he raised money enough to send us kids to high school and stuff like that. Eventually the poultry business in the Midwest boomed, and there was no income here in New England for poultry farmers, so he gave it up. He was an excellent carpenter and a painter and a mason, and – you name it – he could do it.

Charles: Do you have brothers or sisters?

Walter: Yes, I have a sister [Margery Walker Piper] who is still alive. She lives in Laconia. She has a daughter and a son. Her daughter is in California and her son lives nearby in Laconia. My brother Danny, who was five years younger than I, used to live in Andover, and he was unfortunate with the women he married. Now he lives in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. He has built himself a new home up there. My sister sees him once a while, but he comes down this way very seldom. He was very handy, and he inherited my father's skills. My brother is an excellent carpenter, and in some ways, he is more clever than I am. I've seen some of the things he did. He has a lot of original ideas, which I don't have. He could do a lot of plumbing and masonry work, the same as my father, but he wasn't a blacksmith like my dad was.

Charles: What do you remember about growing up with your brother and sister?

Walter: We were lucky. We grew up during the Depression, but my grandfather was still alive and in good health then. My grandfather had a typical small farm with a pair of oxen, a couple of cattle, a pig, some poultry, a turkey or two, and maybe a few ducks. So, we were very well off foodwise. We had no money and we never saw the dentist or a doctor, unless there was really a major catastrophe.

There was a brook nearby and during the summers we had an awful lot of fun swimming in that brook. Fishing in that brook, before the Second World War, was incredible – you could go out anywhere. In fact, that's one of the earliest memories I have of my grandfather. I found his fly rod, and I found some worms, and I went out. The fish would bite, but I didn't know enough to give one jerk and set the hook, and of course the fish

would just let go when I pulled. I went in crying because I couldn't catch any fish, so my grandfather came out, showed me how to set the hook. So then, we had a lot of fish for breakfast.

It was like that until the end of the Second World War and then people had time and they learned about the beautiful fishing in that brook. In no time at all, the good fishing was gone and the only time it was good fishing then, and now, is after it's stocked by the State of New Hampshire—and it doesn't last very long.

We were very lucky in that my grandfather was able to do these things. If he hadn't been there, I don't know how we would have made it with my father in bed suffering so much pain that he begged his mother to shoot him. Naturally she didn't, and eventually he fought his way back. It was a rough life for all of us, mostly my mother, because she had to take care of my father. She was teaching school in the one-room schoolhouse in North Wilmot at the same time and taking care of us kids. So she had one hell of a burden. I don't know how she ever did it.

Charles: Was there anything you did in your childhood that stands out as a particularly happy time?

Walter: Yeah. It always seemed to me that there would be two happy things and then a bad thing. My father had brought home a Collie puppy, and it was an awfully nice dog, and we had an awful lot of fun with it. We were doing something one, day, playing with it, and it accidentally ran out into the road. Somebody struck it. It was an accident. It couldn't be helped. So that was a happy time punctured by a very sad time. It always seemed to me that happened in my life. I'd have two nice things and then a bad thing. But that was an early happy time.

In grade school we all worked during the Second World War collecting a lot of scrap metal and things like that. Another thing that we collected, and people sometimes wondered about that, but we collected milkweed pods, and they used those to make life vests for saving people that were on ships that were torpedoed and that sort of thing. That was one thing we did. We collected scrap iron, and we had a great big pile of scrap iron at school, and Audrey Curren took a picture of us all on top with this big pile of iron before they came and picked it up and took it for the war effort.

There were a lot of happy times at school too. One time that stands out in my memory was we had a beautiful [snow] crust and there was a field in front of the whole place,

which was next to the one-room schoolhouse in South Danbury, and we had this beautiful, beautiful crust. It was so good that Audrey Curren came out after lunch and joined us, and we stayed out beyond the total hour that we were allowed at noontime, sliding. Then when we came back, lo and behold, there was a superintendent who had come to visit school. Poor Audrey was embarrassed, but the superintendent calmed her right down and said, "If I was a few years younger, I would have been out there with you." So that was a happy time on the crust. We used to make a little dams on the hillside with the water in the springtime. There were a lot of a lot of happy times there in the one-room schoolhouse.

Charles: Did you go through all eight years there?

Walter: Yes, we went through eight grades. It was a little strange, because I was held back one year. It was a mile and a half walk to school and in the summertime, spring, and fall it was fine, but in the wintertime when the wind was blowing and it was down below zero, that mile and a half seemed like five miles. It was – it was torture. I remember both my sister and I crying when we got home. We were suffering so from the cold because we just did not have the stuff that they have today, the ski equipment, the downs, and all that stuff, to keep us warm. We had some frostbite. I have an ear that's a little strange today from frostbite. I was held back a year, and I was a year behind everybody else because of that.

Charles: Where did you go to high school?

Walter: I went to high school in Andover, which now has no high school. I graduated in 1949. It was a girls' school long before it was a boys' or girls' high school. The boys went to Proctor and the girls went to Andover. Around 1932, or somewhere along there, it was changed, so both boys and girls went to Andover. Sometime in the 1960s the last class graduated from Andover and it was turned into a middle school and there's no Andover High School anymore. But we have reunions and a lot of people come. Sometimes they even come from Florida to attend our high school reunions. We're very fortunate that the Ordways [a South Danbury family] opened their field and set it up for activities. They have a small pond, and they would throw that open for the Andover High School reunions, and it worked out really great. We get to meet our old classmates and some that were there before us and some that were behind us.

Charles: How did you get to high school?

Walter: We were very lucky. There was a train that went down at the right time in the morning and a train that came back at a right time in the afternoon. We got a student ticket for about a third to a quarter of the price of a normal ticket. I think we got one for one or two weeks and the conductor would punch it, just like a regular ticket.

That was great for at least one year and maybe a year and a half. Then they started doing away with some of the trains, and they substituted a bus. Eventually they even did away with the bus, and it got to be very difficult to get to school.

About that time I turned 16, and I was able to get my driver's license, which was a little bit different in those days. I went out with my father, with my folks' car, to Danbury where an old farmer was giving the tests for the driver's license. We went in, and I had a written test to begin with, and he handed it to me, and he said, "If you have any trouble with that just let me know and I'll help you with some."

I didn't have to ask him for help, and I guess I did it okay because he looked it over and said, "Yeah that's all right," he said, "you made one mistake here, but you still will pass." Then he said, "We'll go for a ride." My father had said to him, "He's been driving at home for the last three or four years on the farm." I was actually driving off the farm some of the time, but he didn't mention that. We drove, probably 500 feet or something, and I turned around and drove back, and he gave me my driver's license. That's how you got your driver's license back in those days. If you could see him, then your eyes were good enough. If you could drive down a road and back and without staving up the car then you passed. It was so different back in those days.

Charles: What year were you married?

Walter: Don't embarrass me Charlie.

Charles: Alright, how many years have you been married?

Walter: That's even worse! I got out [of the service] in 1954 and so I met her [Judith Ripley Walker] in '55. We were married in 1955.

Charles: You mentioned your children earlier. Who are your children and where are they now?

Walter: Again, we are very lucky. We have four healthy children, and they all live in the area. Our oldest son, Wade, followed my career. He's a carpenter now and works for a

local contractor. The next oldest son, his real name is Daniel, we all call him Rusty. He's the one that still lives on the farm in South Danbury, where I grew up, and the sixth generation to be there. He's a professional—commercial cleaning. The third child is our daughter Holly. She's a professional woman. She owns and runs Compass Travel in New London. She married an Italian, Luigi Minoletti, and they have no children. My youngest son, Nathan, who was a natural mechanic, and I could see that when he was a teenager. But I am surprised he turned out to be an excellent businessman. He has his own garage down here in Wilmot Flat, and he's a very successful businessman. Without him I'd be lost. Whenever I had anything go wrong with any of my mechanical stuff, I can always call him, and he almost always can bail me out.

Charles: We've had a great chat here. I've enjoyed this. Is there anything else you can think of you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

Walter: When I was fouled up with my second back, the people around here, not only around Wilmot, everyone here was so good to me. They collected money twice – twice they collected money for me. Judy would go to what was then Crescenti's in New London for food and stuff, and they would say, "Your bill's already paid." She'd go in to pay the oil bill and they would say, "The bill's already paid." We never knew who did those things. People were so good to us.

Charles: That's a great note to end on. Walter, thank you very much. This has been terrific.

Credits

Videographer: Lindy Heim

Interviewer: Charles Thompson

Photos

Danny and Margery Walker Skiing, 1944

From Walter Walker's book, *History of Wilmot, New Hampshire*, 2nd edition published 2017.

Music

On the Passing of Time

Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com)

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Summary

On April 28, 2011 Wilmot Historical Society volunteers Lindy Heim and Charles Thompson interviewed Walter Walker about his life and previous generations of his family who lived in Wilmot, New Hampshire.