George Peterson Interviews Frank Langley June 15, 1993

This is an interview with Frank E. Langley, a 78 year-old-native of Wilmot. This interview is being conducted on June 15, 1993 at Mr. Langley's home on Bunker Hill Road. The interviewer is George Peterson representing the Wilmot Historical Society.

Good Morning, Frank.

F. Good Morning, George.

Frank, I'd like to start this interview off by asking you a little bit about your Mom and Dad. What was your Mom's name?

Abby Cora Williams Langley.

Okay, so Abby Williams—Williams was her maiden name?

Yes.

Okay, and where was she from?

I'm sorry but I don't recall right now where she was born.

Was she from New Hampshire?

Oh yes.

Okay, and what did your Dad do?

Farmer.

He was a farmer?

Yes, and he took part in town affairs some, too.

Now, when were you born?

May 5, 1915.

And where?

In Wilmot right in this house, I was born in this house and I lived here all of my life in this house for 78 years.

Wow! What's your education, Frank, where did you go to school?

Eight years in Wilmot Center School, and I only attended high school for 6 weeks when I dropped out.

Okay. And you're married to Clara Bigelow Langley.

Yes.

And Clara is how old?

75.

And, where was Clara born?

I believe in Fayette, Maine.

Okay. How many children do you and Clara have?

3.

And what are their names?

My older daughter is Louise Langley Huntley, and my only son is Ronald Aubrey Langley and my younger daughter is Nancy Florence Langley.

I'd like to take you back as far as you can somewhat remember, Frank, and tell me a little bit about life in Wilmot as you were growing up. You said you went to the Wilmot Center School. How many classmates did you have?

It varied. If you mean the whole attendance in the school it probably . . . 'cuz the teacher had all 8 grades, and I would say on the average around 30 to 35 pupils. In my grades, it would vary probably from 2 to 3 or 4.

Who was your teacher or who were your teachers, do you remember?

We had a lot of different teachers.

And the school was located where?

In Wilmot Center on North Wilmot Road just beyond the Town Hall.

Where the library is?

Yes, between the Town Hall and the church—Congregational Church.

What was life like in Wilmot back then when you were going to school, Frank?

It was pretty calm compared to what it's like today. People seemed to have time to visit with you, to socialize and spend more time socializing. And, of course, things were slow. We weren't in the fast lane then, and things moved slower. And of course, the roads were poor and narrow.

But what was it like as a child growing up here?

Well, it's quite interesting because there were plenty of things to do to explore around the countryside.

I would imagine since your Dad was a farmer you had to work on the farm quite a bit.

Oh, yes, yes.

What kinds of things did you do?

Well, of course, when we did spring work I had to lead or drive the horse while he was plowing or cultivating or marking out for field corn or potatoes. And also in haying time we, of course, had to you know, rake hay. Sometimes he'd have me rake with the horse and the horse rake, and sometimes I'd be maybe raking 'scavenge' which is what they called the drag or wool rake and sometimes I'd be pitching on hay or pitching off hay or up on the hayloft loading it on the hayride. This was loose hay, of course.

Now, did you have cattle?

Oh yes, we kept 12 on average at that time—probably from 8 to 12 head of cattle. And my father used to keep a pair of horses, but in my memory, when I was real young, he was down to just one horse, and so, we were farming with just one horse.

Now were the cattle for milking?

Yes. The cattle, three or four of them were for milking, and then when I got big enough to drive the horse and the steers, we raised up little calves and

trained them to the oxen and of course, we used them for plowing and also to yard out wood or sleds in the winter.

What was it like in the winters back then when you were growing up?

Well, some winters were colder than others and some more snow than others. But of course then, the roads were rolled with a snow roller.

Tell me about that.

The snow roller was approximately 8 feet wide in two sections because I suppose of getting around a corner, if they had one long piece it would end up to not turn corners. Of course, it was pulled with 3 or 4 pair of horses and there was a frame on top where the drivers would sit up and ride on it. And of course, I say, because of the two sections there was about a foot in the center that didn't get rolled so sleighs and sleds had to have, especially a one-horse sleigh or sled, the harness had to be offset so the horse would be traveling where they rolled and not in that foot of snow in the center. Of course, a pair of horses there would be one on each side anyway.

As a child, what kind of games did you play with the other children?

Well, of course, when we went to school I suppose there's different games around that we played. For some reason I just don't seem to remember any particular game. Of course, I used to play with neighbor children when walking to school and at recess.

Do you remember some of their names?

Oh yes, I played quite a bit with Maxwell Campbell Sr. who was two or three years younger than I am, and, of course, a lot of my playmates are gone, like some of my favorite playmates were the five Bertagna boys. Of course, we went off on excursions, different places. They had a car and they'd take me with them so that worked out fine for me, too. And also, Ralph Gove particularly, I was close friends with him.

Take me through, a little bit, Frank, of as you got older and you said that you dropped out of school—out of high school? What did you do when you dropped out of high school? Did you go to work full time?

No, no. I was at home most of the time along with my father helping him on the farm here. And what I did, pick up odd jobs, as I say such as buck time and maybe putting up a culvert for some of the neighbors. And there'd be in the fall perhaps a few days of work possibly a week or more, shoveling gravel by hand in the dump truck because in those days there were no loaders and you just picked it by hand and shoveled it by hand into a small truck which in those days, perhaps the first truck, would only hold a yard—they were small.

Now, here in Wilmot Center, what businesses were there around this area Frank when you were growing up.

There weren't too many when I was growing up. The businesses-- all those mills along the brook-- was before my time—either I was too young to remember or before I was born. There just, of course, was a store run by Marcus Grace.

Now where was that located?

The building is no longer there now but it was right across the road from where Donna Yohan lives at present.

Okay, on Bunker Hill or 4A?

On 4A. And of course, the Post Office at that time, I believe that Marcus Grace had the Post Office, but it shifted around quite a few times during my lifetime, you know.

What is this I hear about the mica shop?

During WWII there was a feldspar mine up 4A about 3 miles up the road a ways, and so they processed that feldspar and mica in a shop—they had 2 shops in Wilmot—One was located about 300 or 400 feet in the small building which used to be a hearse house, and they had hired women to process and cut and shape up the mica and sort it out and also the mine manager, Guy Smith, lived where Hall Antiques is now and they had a shop in there where some women would work in there and they had to do the same thing they had to do in the old hearse house.

Okay, so this is right down the road from you?

Yes.

What other businesses were there? Do you remember if there were any others?

Well, not many. Most everybody back in those days, they sorta farmed more or less. Practically everybody kept a cow and a horse, at least a cow—even right in the Village. They may have got some hay or had some fields to cut some hay.

I'd like to take a look at your work career because I believe you had a number of jobs. Let's take it from the beginning. You said that you would work to earn some additional money by cutting wood, what else did you do while you were growing up? Can you kind of take me down the path there?

Well, I just mentioned that we had the chance to work for the Town for a few days in the Fall down the road, my driveway, shoveling gravel while they improved the roads a little bit.

After you worked for the town, what did you do?

I didn't work out steady until after my father died. He died in 1941 and I tried farming for a year or two but I knew I really couldn't make a living that way so I sold the cattle off and the first summer worked for my sister's husband, Frank Walker, in the poultry business. I worked for him. He raised chickens and sold eggs and poultry.

And where was this?

That was in Danbury—down North Wilmot Road from South Danbury. And I worked there one summer. I believe that was 1942 or 3.

When did you work for the WPA?

That was later. As I say, after that summer I worked for my brother-in-law and then I worked with my neighbor, Leonard Grace, cutting lumber, you know, with no chain saws then, just a buck saw, a cross cut saw and an axe. And my first steady job I believe started in 1943 or 4 was with Murray Caldwell who raised a lot of potatoes. And his place of growing potatoes was up what was later Camp Tabor which we consider now as Granite Hill or Jones Hill or something along that. And so, he cleared the fields which were starting to grow up so I worked with him. We cleared the fields, dug out the rocks and disposed of them and piled them with a pair of horses the first

summer and then later that fall he got a tractor—Farmall H-- and so we could do better and faster work with it. And I know some years he raised up to 33,000 bushels of potatoes.

Now was that considered very large?

Yes, for this section of the country. It wouldn't be large for Aroostook County Maine, but nobody else ever raised that many in this area. And I worked for him for 7 years, and he moved to New London and he sorta couldn't keep up the payments on the mortgage, so he lost that on that. Then I worked two years down the mink ranch which was down at the foot of Center Hill about ½ mile from Wilmot Center. For 2 summers I worked on the mink ranch. And then I had a chance to be employed over the Colby Homestead Farm in New London and that was the best job I ever had because it lasted for 15 years before they closed the farm down. And of course, there we did everything with the tractor and equipment and also baled hay—no more loose haying, and they did not sell any milk at all, just beef cattle. We did keep one cow—a milk cow—for our own use. And they were very, very nice people to work for. I worked for Congressman James Cleveland's mother Susan Colgate Cleveland. Those barns now are Colby-Sawyer Library, which my daughter Nancy works in the library—has for years.

That's kind of appropriate. And what did you do after the job on the Colby Farm?

Well, for two winters I worked with my neighbor Lawrence Rowe for the state in the winter. Back then, they didn't have automatic salting and sanding machines so we had to have a man in the truck shoveling the salt that would run down the tube on the Ford Road. That was where we worked was on the Interstate 89.

Now I understand you were a wing man on the snow plow. What was that?

That was earlier and of course, that was just in winter and I believe I started on that job in the late 30's. It was a crawler tractor with two large wings and of course, one operating the cab and two wing men because the wings were not hydraulic. And so you had chain falls to raise the wings up and down in the rear and the crank to raise the point of the wing up and down.

So, what followed after the Colby Farm?

Yes, I don't remember going out on the tractor. They discontinued using that around '45, well, I guess around '50. I was out only once after I was married and Clara and I were married in 1951, and I went out once after that. And then they discontinued using the tractor and went to trucks to plow the roads.

Okay, and then what about after that?

That was when I started working for Murray Caldwell and the potato business and also at the mink ranch and then to the Freeman farm in New London.

Okay, and what about after that?

I sort of retired because of a disability in…19…oh yes, I did work two years or something as a laborer in the construction business for two summers and all my eyesight was failing so I applied for disability and social security which I still am receiving, and I did work at some odd jobs as a laborer helping my nephew, Walter Walker, who was a carpenter and he employed me off and on a day now and then. And I did that off and on and as well as some for my neighbor, Lawrence Rowe, he works at the paper in New London and then I haven't done anything like that for two years now. I just retired.

Let's go back in time a little bit when you were in the potato business. I understand there was a storage shed somewhere in the area.

Yes, and we called it the "potato house" because that's where they stored the potatoes in the winter. It was partially dug out of earth and then built out of lumber and the dirt pushed up round for insulation as well as sawdust upstairs on the floor—insulation to keep the potatoes from freezing.

How big was this shed would you say?

Oh, I would say it was 50 feet long and probably 30 feet wide and it was very tall—probably 20 feet tall.

And where was it located?

It was located on Campground Road right at the intersection of Cross Hill Road and the Campground Road.

Tell me also, if you can, about the hurricane of 1938, Frank.

I remember that we had the radio on. And, of course, you didn't hear too much forecasting until they started talking to be aware of strong winds and late in the afternoon of mid-September—I don't remember what day—in 1938 the wind picked up. It got stronger and stronger and finally a tree across the road blew down. I think perhaps 2 of them—one near the house—this house and then a larger one across the road next to the cemetery. And we had a little garage—didn't have any doors on it. And the wind got under that and lifted the roof right up. It didn't quite clear the car. As the wind blew it back, one corner landed on the back of the car. My father and I went out and tried to remove it but it was too heavy so we just came back in. And of course, the rain being pushed by that strong wind, you know, felt like hail coming against the face. Incidentally, the day before the hurricane we had so much rain it was like a flood. The water was running across the road--around the Town hall across the road and the Town Hall between the bridge and Don Brady's house. And that, of course, loosened up the roots that's why they figured the hurricane did so much damage blowing down the forest and trees. And of course, that ruined where we used to have Old Home Day down to the Campground on the Campground Road near the intersection of Cross Hill Road and Campground Road and there was a beautiful grove of hardwood and softwood trees, and it just ruined that so Old Home Day was never carried on there again. And of course, it was a WPA project to clean up, and I was on that. We went through the woods. They called it "cuttin' trails" you know, because there was so much a mass of trees down so if there was a forest fire the forest fighters can have trails and reach wherever the fire was.

And where did you do this WPA work of clearing trails?

In the town of Wilmot . . . all over the town of Wilmot. I don't recall us doing anything about the Flat, but at any rate, we did around Wilmot Center but mostly in North Wilmot. It's like here, it's really woodland where there's no buildings.

Were there that many trees that were downed?

Oh yeah, yeah. Yes they did a lot of damage everywhere there's forest. Some worse than others, of course.

Did you ever harvest maple syrup?

Well, my father did a little bit on his own, but usually he just teamed up with a neighbor to sell. And I did work off and on across the years and spring for Dr. William Clough, I worked with Bill Taylor who was his man on that job and of course, we carried sap buckets in our hand. They did have a pipeline some places, but even so which you could store tunnel-like in and then we'd go to trees and gather the sap in pails and then go to this tunnel and drop it in the funnel, and it would take it down to a holding tank in or near the sap house.

Now where was this?

The sap house was located in Wilmot but it's near the New London town line; well, you could reach it by going over Grace Road and going down a steep hill. It's their land, but it does not operate at all now. They don't make syrup any more.

Now tell me about, I understand there's a story about your mom feeding the telephone crews as they were putting up the lines for the first telephones?

That is correct. They were installing heavy cable telephone lines and one of them stopped and asked my mother if she knew of anybody they could buy a hot dinner or lunch from in the middle of the day for while the job lasted, you know, two or three weeks in this area at noon. So she said, yes, I'll feed you. I believe there were from 8 to 12 men in that crew, and she fed them every noon for two or three weeks.

Now this would have been . . . how old would you have been then?

Right around 30 years old.

Do you remember getting your first phone?

Had the telephone put in well around the late 40's as I recall. Because it was quite a novel experience.

Now what's this I hear about you taking up supplies up to the top of Kearsarge Mountain?

In 1935 there was a WPA project to erect beacon towers on 4 different locations that this Wilmot crew had to work on. One was down in Webster,

NH, and one on top of Kearsarge Mountain; one on Philbrick Hill in Wilmot; and one up in Plainfield. And so we worked on them at different times in the summer. The first job was to cut and clear. I believe it was a 50' swath for a power line to run electricity up it to run the beacon. One of those beacons was a revolving beacon that flashed the light in a circle so you could warn planes. And the one on Kearsarge was just a blinking . . . red blinking off and on beacon. And after we finished cutting the road out for the electric lines, then they started carrying up sections for the tower and so forth. They were in sections so you'd carry just 2 pieces of angle iron at a time. And I believe there was about 12 or 15 members of us on that team doing that work.

Now how long did it take you to cut a trail up to the top of Mt. Kearsarge?

Well, we didn't have to do much cutting on Mt. Kearsarge because we came up on the Warner side, and it was cleared out. Chances are because of the lookout tower up there, they may have had electricity up there anyway. I don't remember, but we did have to cut a trail down in Webster and one up in Philbrick Hill in Wilmot and the one up in Plainfield for electricity.

When did you go to work for the WPA?

That was the first time I was on the WPA.

Now was that just a summer job?

Yes, it was completed by fall.

And you did that for 3 or 4 years?

No, that was just one summer job. It was cool enough so that by late fall they had the towers completed and set up in place.

But you continued to work for the next few summers?

Off and on yes. See that was 1935—the beacon job. So, the next one was on clearing trails after the hurricane. And they also had a WPA project to grade and fill in wash outs because of the flood previous to the hurricane that did a lot of damage on a lot of roads—deep washing gutters and ravines had to be filled in so that was a WPA job too.

Now I understand that you delivered milk as a young man?

Yes, for my father, just locals in the village—6 or 8 quarts a day, and I only did that a year or two after my father died.

Well tell me a little about delivering milk? What did you deliver it in?

Oh, just had the hand carrier. Sometimes we'd take the car and sometimes we didn't. But you'd put the milk in glass quart bottles and then take it down to the Center where it was sold.

Now if you drove I understand you had a Model B.

It belonged to my sister. She bought it new in 1932, but she left it here when she went off and taught school so I had use of it. And of course, sometimes my mother would carry the milk down. She walked a lot and of course, it wasn't too heavy—just 3 or 4 quarts—so she would carry it in her hand and we sold some to 2 or 3 neighbors. It wasn't a big deal.

How did you get your nickname "bucksaw"? I understand that people used to refer to you as "Bucksaw" Langley.

After I dropped out of high school, I admit, I didn't enjoy going to high school but the eye doctor back then they thought you should save your eyesight so when an eye doctor said you were lucky to get your 8 years of elementary school so don't try to go to high school. And I was only too willing to quit anyway so we got odd jobs from the neighbors of sawing out 4 foot wood into stove lengths for the stove because, of course, then, there was no chain saw so we did it with a buck saw placing wood on a saw horse and so they'd always call me "bucksaw" from seeing me do that so much around town.

Now I understand that there was some sort of hay scale?

Yes, apparently some of the farmers in town had formed some sort of association and so they bought these hay scales which you could drive—they were so large a platform—you could drive a vehicle—you know a wagon—I doubt they were used so much in the winter but in the summer mostly so they could weigh different loads of hay and so forth and you could drive right on them and then you'd weigh them with a box that stood upright 4 feet high and just slid the bar along like most of them type of scales 'til you got the proper weight.

Now where was this located?

They were located at the foot of Bunker Hill right next to what is now 4A.

Where did the name Bunker Hill Road come from—was it named after someone?

Yes. My father, Aubrey Langley, bought the house that I now live in in 1901 from a man by the name of Sylvester Bunker and that's why this hill got this name of Bunker Hill.

Tell me a little bit about your family life.

Well, we had a good time in life. As I said, we worked, my brother didn't work too much on the home here I mean before he moved away, I would imagine, because back then the patrolman was a very small area. There were several but there would be just one patrolman out for the state highway or back then there'd be 3 or 4 so he worked for a patrolman by the name of Arthur Seavey for several years in the summer when the winter was gone.

Now your brother's name was?

Maurice Langley.

Did you have any other brothers or sisters?

No, he was the only brother I had. But I had 3 sisters.

And what were their names.

The oldest one was Florence Langley, who never married, and she was a school teacher. She used to teach school—before she went to college—in the Stearns school in North Wilmot, and then she went to Simmons College and graduated there after 4 years near Boston, and then she taught school in various places: New Hampton, Laconia, and Derry and Lyndonborough, I believe that's the name of it. And then she taught most of the years after that in Milford; then she retired from teaching in Milford and moved back to Wilmot and lived quite a few years in Walter Walker's house, which is known as Fred's Wedge on the Pinnacle Road. And then, of course my brother was really the oldest member of the family. And then Florence was the second oldest. But my brother married in 1932 and moved to Wilmot Flat with his wife Doris; and he worked in New London for landscaping people. And then

my next oldest sister was Annie Langley Walker who married Frank Walker and she taught school up in North Road School they called it for several years in that section of North Wilmot. He was a carpenter for quite a few years—an excellent carpenter. And then he had some sort of a paralysis in 1935, and he didn't recover enough from that so he could do a good job at carpenter work, so he went into the poultry business to sell eggs and also to sell poultry in the fall. Then she retired from teaching school. Then my youngest sister was Pricilla, and she worked out as a maid for different people to care for their children and so forth. Mostly she was in one place over at Cranehurst over in New London, but there wasn't children over there, but she had various household duties. My sister Annie is the only one that's still living. Her husband died 3 years ago and she is 89 years old. And now she's still living alone at present.

When did you meet Clara?

Clara Bigelow came to Wilmot to teach school in 1949 and then we met and dated in 1950 and we were married in 1951.

And you've lived the entire time here?

Yes, since we met we've lived entirely here in this house.

Did you know any Civil War Veterans as a young man?

Yes, yes, I did. There was one named Edgar Law who lived where Reed Berkey now lives on Cross Hill Road, and I remember him calling here to stop with his horse and buggy or through the winter with his horse and sleigh and visiting with my father for a few minutes. And the other one was named William Gould, and he lived up 4A about 4 miles above Wilmot Center, and he used to come and visit us. And records show that he was a sharp shooter in the Civil War. He used to like to tease my sister Pricilla because he'd come up and visit and the first thing he'd say, "Hello Pricilla. How's John Alden today?" And once, as I used to come home for lunch from school and go back after lunch in the afternoon and walk down Bunker Hill, he walked down with me. I don't remember him having a horse. He must have walked a lot, and like he was demonstrating—we (he?) held his hands as if he was holding a rifle and he was trying to tell me about some incident in the Civil War which I didn't understand too well, but it was interesting at least.

And were those two gentlemen the last Civil War Veterans in this county?

Yes, they were Civil War Veterans of this country.

Were they the last ones though?

They were the only ones that I ever knew of that lived in this area. There are some other towns around which I wasn't acquainted with—a few.

What other anecdotes or little stories do you have to share with us?

Well, for instance my father celebrated 4th of July when I guess I was too young to go with him, my brother and his friend used to have an old buggy with the body off and just the 4 wheels on and probably something sharp to pull it by, and they would get an old mill saw—accordion saw—and have a hammer and beat on it, and you can imagine the noise that they would make, and of course, usually they would have fire crackers and Fred Goodhue used to have fireworks displays that he'd show in the dooryard of the Academy Apartments down near 4A—it's part of Bunker Hill now, and then also, the Methodist Church which burned in the 1950's I believe—it had a beautiful sounding bell, and we all used to ring that bell on the 4th of July. And also if there was a fire in town, that bell would be rang too, and people would know there was a fire somewhere.

What can you tell me about the pound located next door here?

When I was a young boy—the pound, of course, wasn't used in my lifetime at all, they stopped using it before I was born—anyway there used to be huge hemlock logs on top of the walls so to give added height so that the animals when they did keep them in the pound, couldn't escape. But of course, gradually those all rotted off and the rocks fell down some. But a few years ago the Historical Society got the Road Agent to erect them back so it looks very nice now. But no, no logs on top of it though.

How old is the cemetery across the street?

I really don't know. It's been there for a long time. I imagine even before my parents' time probably, at least before they lived in this house anyway.

Now was your Dad born in Wilmot?

No, I believe he was born in Cilleyville.

How did you spend your evenings, Frank, growing up?

Well, usually we'd have supper and then we'd go out to the barn and do the chores and milking and see to the cow and the horse and so forth. And then we'd come back in and of course that was before television, but we did have a radio, so we'd listen to the radio. Usually just 15-minute programs but some had a half-hour program, and then we had neighbors that lived above us by the name of Bill and Phyllis that used to drop in quite frequently, and maybe we'd sit and talk or listen to the 15-minute programs on the radio.

Was the radio then what our TV's are to us now?

Not quite because we didn't spend so much time listening to radio as people do TV, in watching TV now.

What else did you do for fun? Did you do any hiking?

Oh yes, with some of my boyhood pals we used to hike up to Kesslers or Kearsarge Mountain and take sleeping bags with us and we'd head in and stay overnight.

And what would you do?

Well we'd take some food with us, but not a lot. Usually we picked good weather so it wasn't too cold. And one night the lookout fire warden even let us stay in the tower all night because he didn't stay in the tower all night when the weather was pretty foggy and so forth.

What other kinds of things did you do to break up the monotony of farm work? What did you do for fun?

We'd probably hike other places too. Plus, we'd go in swimming now and then in hot weather.

Where?

We called the swimming hole . . .we used to leave the road up 4A where Raymond Franklin lives and walk across the meadow to what they call the old swimming hole in the brook. And if we didn't go swimming there, then we might drive over to Elkins and go swimming in Pleasant Lake; or the Bertagna boys used to take me down to Hamden there's a place down there they called Meadow Barns for some reason or other, there was a river there that was a good place to go in swimming and diving.

How often would you go into New London?

Not very often because most of the shopping was done in the local store like Marcus Grace or Charles Violas. And of course, for recreation the Bertagna boys would pick me up and sometimes Ralph Gove did once – I remember Ralph and I went over to Claremont. He had the car so we took his car. And so we asked how much they'd charge us to fly over Kessler's/Kearsarge Mountain in Wilmot—this was in 1975. And they said they would charge us $6.00 a piece. It was in an old bird airplane—open cockpit.

Was that your first plane ride?

No, the first plane ride was in 1930 just before I dropped out of high school and Caesar Bertagna and Felix Bertagna, my favorite boyhood pals along with Ralph Gove.

Now where did the Bertagna's live?

They lived up 4A about 3 ½ miles and they had a house that was burned so it isn't even in existence now. Later on their mother moved down to Wilmot Center. But anyway, they were still in high school—Caesar and Felix—oh yes, and John, who was killed later, but at that time he was alive and so the three of us went to Concord Airport whatever they call it, the national guard—different people who came in with sports plane--back then, if a plane went 150 mph that was terrific, of course, that speed, then. And so we paid $2 a piece to go up in an open cockpit biplane, and I remember Caesar Bertagna took the first ride. I worked all summer cutting brush on the road. My father gave me $5, and I had $1, so I had $6. $2 went for the first ride, and I asked John if he was going to go up, and he said no he couldn't afford to. So, I said, I have $4 left so we'll go up, the two of us, and I'll pay your way and mine. So that was the end of the $6. It was worth it. We enjoyed it. A summer's work went up in a few minutes for airplane rides.

So, you got paid $5 or $6 for working all summer?

He gave me $5 for doing the job. Now I had to complete it before I got the $5. I cut brush on one side of the road. I don't know where I did get the other dollar, but . . . On the way to the airport they just had this whippit roadster, the Bertagna boys, and you aren't supposed to have too many and of course, there were 4 of us, 3 Bertagnas and myself, so before we got to the City of Concord, there was no rumble seat in the trunk so they put me in

the trunk so we wouldn't get arrested, of course they still had 3 in the front seat; and then they let me out. Then we did the same thing when we left the Airport and come back. Then after we got outside of Concord, they let me out again, and I rode in the front with them. We did a lot of crazy things in those days.

Now what about any kind of mischief you may have gotten into like at school?

Oh boy. Well one year, for some reason, we had a lot of different teachers and there was one, her name was Miss Saunders, she was older and she should have been retired, but unfortunately, she wasn't always called Miss Saunders, they used to call her "the old hen," and we got away with everything except murder. Fortunately, there wasn't any murder. But they would come up with stunts like shooting rubber bands on the top of the desk with a long stick, knocking books out of your hands; and they would set the clock back, and I don't know why she didn't notice the difference so we'd get out of school an hour early in the afternoon. But when the superintendent come and she, the teacher, said it's time for me to let the children out. And looks at his watch and says, well no it isn't. That clock is an hour fast. So that was the end of that; so, we didn't get away with that again. Well, the Bertagna boys one morning they brought the scent bag from a skunk into school and they had fun putting it around different desks and finally it ended up in a jar on the teacher's desk—this same Miss Saunders, the teacher. Well, a boy by the name of Warren Saunders, just a couple of years older than me, he said, "I know how to get rid of that odor. I'll go cut some cedar, I'll bring it back, put it in a pail, and set it afire, and that smoke will take the skunk smell. And she let him do that, but he did that while I was home to my lunch so when I had gotten back down to school, the teacher and all the kids were outdoors because the schoolhouse was so full of smoke they couldn't stand it to stay in there. But eventually, it cleared out and so we resumed school such as it was. So I don't remember how many months she worked there but too many. Even one boy by the name of Lawrence Leavitt told her he was in the 6th grade, and he was only really in the 5th, and I don't know, you wouldn't have thought he would get away with it—there must have been some record—but he got away with it, and he was always in the 6th grade, but after that he had to go back to the 5th.

Frank, you've seen a lot of things in your lifetime. You were born in 1915, did you say. What are just some of the ways that Wilmot has changed?

The population, I think is about doubled now what it was. I think it's about 1000 now and when I was young it was only about 500, I believe. And of course the roads have improved so much—not only is the population bigger, and a lot more houses around but when I was young there was not blacktop road in Wilmot anywhere. It was all gravel roads and most of them were so narrow when you look at pictures now of the old roads it's hard to believe they were so narrow, but it was much more open. The country has all grown up now and there used to be fields and pastures everywhere. And so, you could to go up on the Pinnacle and look and see off, but now it's all grown up. You walk to the top and you can't see off.

Did everybody know one another?

Oh yes, everybody was much more neighborly. We knew everybody. When I was real young, if I went somewhere with my father, every house we came to I'd say, "Who lives there?"'; and usually could tell me who it was. Well, they swapped work some in those days, the farmers did help each other out some. And we used to plow in the spring. Once a neighbor who had a pair of oxen that weren't too big and so we put both pair of oxen together to plow. And I remember that some of us were stopping to get a break and stopped over to drink a little hard cider, and one of the steer decided to jump on the owner so that made him take off. They took off, of course they were still hitched to the plow and they headed for the barn. And unfortunately, there were too many rocks along the way to the barn and the plow hit a rock and broke the . . . once in a while they'd go in the ground and leave a little furrow and then they hit a rock and broke the mold board of the plow off. Of course, when they got in the barnyard or something they didn't want to go any farther so they stopped and of course the neighbors all kinda stopped too, so we found them in the barnyard still hitched to the plow with a broken mold board. So my father had to invest in a new plow. Of course, in the evenings when, as I say, we used to sit around and listen to the radio—a lot of those programs were 15 minutes or ½ an hour like some of my favorite programs—like Amos and Andy and The Great Gildersleeve. And there was some program that was similar to Down East, like there was a radio session

supposedly all fiction, of course, Down East was supposed to be humorous and comical. So we enjoyed it.

Did you go to church at all as a child or as a young man?

Not much. Occasionally. Usually once a year, Old Home Sunday, I'd go to that.

When it was held down at Campground?

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about that, Frank? What was that like?

Old Home Day? Well, originally, you see, they called the Campground because they held Camp Meetings there years ago. Of course, people used to convene more, and folks from quite a few towns met there, the whole meeting was really just camp meetings. So my father used to joke. He'd say he thought there was more souls made there than they were saved. But it was a good time and Marcus Grace used to have what they'd call a vittlin' tent down in there, and he'd sell ice cream and soft drink.

It was called what?

A vittlin' tent.

There was a wooden structure which they just used but some people had camps there where they could come and stay anytime they want to in the summer. Not too many. And they would have speeches in the afternoon. I remember one man giving a speech, he started in by saying, "How many years ago this place was a howling wilderness," apparently, he lost his train of thought so pretty soon he said, "This place was a howling wilderness and I wish it was now!" But we all had a good time. Of course, we did have a picnic dinner there, and I remember we all looked forward to a man, a cousin, coming up from Massachusetts, he was in the ice cream business, and he always brought brick ice cream, which was one of the highlights for us kids, of course.

Now how big of an event was this? How many people would gather?

I would say, oh probably 100, maybe a 150. Quite a few.

You were talking about the Old Home Day Gatherings. Were they ever pretty rowdy?

Oh, people behaved, very well, I'd say. Young people, they were the ones apt to get rowdy in those days as they are today. People were more respectful of their elders.

Were there a lot of young people your age, back then, in town?

Not too many. No. The Bertagna boys, or Farnums, or Goves, they never came. There probably were a few there, I'd imagine, but not many. I suppose Old Home Day appealed more to older people than it did to the younger generation.

Well, who were some of the people who not necessarily went to the Old Home Day but in general, were there many young people in town? Did you have a lot of friends your age?

Well, I had the 4 Farnum boys and 5 Bertagna boys, and I guess there were 6 or 8 Goves as well as Warren Saunders and Arthur MacKenna and Maxwell Campbell and Connie Campbell. So, I had quite a few. And of course, Marjorie Tilton—she was Marjorie Joyce then.

Do you have any other stories or anecdotes?

Frank, it just occurred to me, we have a lot of reports today in 1993 of things like moose and bear, was there as much wildlife when you were growing up as there is now?

Definitely not. It was rare to see a deer back in those days. Moose were unheard of in this country. All wild turkeys were unheard of or coyotes, unheard of.

Did you see any bear?

No, bears were unheard of in those days. Very rare for anybody to see a bear back in those days.

Was it because perhaps because these animals had all been hunted out?

Perhaps, but I quicker think it was because it was more cleared then. The country's grown up so much, in spite of more houses and development,

there's still a lot more forestlands. The pastures and the fields have been allowed to grow up so there's more forest area for the animals to roam in.

So, the Wilmot of 1993 looks a lot different than the Wilmot of 1920, then?

It certainly does, yes. Back then you could see off in all directions. Oh, there was forest of course, and plenty of woodland for lumber and wood, but at the same time there were so many fields and pastures with just an occasional tree that you could look off in all directions. Like you used to see Kearsarge Mountain from outside the house and you can't now. You can only see about 50 feet and you're looking at tall trees now. But there's one advantage of that, we don't get the strong winds that we used to. In the winter there was so much cleared land there'd be times in blizzard conditions that you couldn't even see across the road. That didn't happen every storm, but occasionally. So now, we don't get hardly strong winds because the trees have grown up so much around us.

Now something which isn't related to your childhood, but someday, if someone is listening to this they might be interested, your wife Clara just recently broke her hip and she is recovering in the hospital and is going to be going into a rehab center for 2 or 3 weeks for physical therapy before she finally gets to come home. Also, you do a lot of walking don't you?

Yes, I do a lot of walking. Yes, I think probably the farthest I've walked is twice I've walked 17 miles, but this is several years ago when we went up to Maine. And then once when my wife was teaching up to Grantham I walked home from there on 89. Lately the farthest I've walked is 10 miles. If I walk over to see my sister Annie Langley Walker in South Danbury, that's 5 miles total. Sometimes I just walk one way and then Clara will fetch me up and sometimes I walk round trip which is 10 miles. Just a few days ago I walked over to see Hal (Harold) Buker over in New London who's a friend of mine, and it's 4 miles each way so I did 8 miles that day. I did it on Sunday, went in and visited about an hour, and when I got home I wasn't even thirsty. But I think I'm part snake anyway because I'm so cold blooded. I have to wear stockings when I go to bed to keep my feet warm and quite often turn on the heating pad so I'm not bothered with all the cramps in my feet and ankles. But I seldom sweat. I did a little yesterday morning.

Well, is there anything, Frank, that I have not asked you that you would like to share with those who might be listening to this tape in years to come. You're one of the Town elders?

Yes, my father used to hold public office. He held the office of selectman for several years, and of course, it wasn't easy to get elected because he was a democrat and the republicans are always much stronger in town when they used to have the two-party system in town. Then he held office Overseer of the Poor several years.

Now did his being in public office ever inspire you to run?

No, in fact I've never even expressed any opinion in Town Meeting as I figured if I didn't say anything they wouldn't know how little I knew. And so, I can talk with one or two persons in private, but I never had enough courage to get up and talk in Town Meeting, and I had no desire to run for Town Office. Of course, I was handicapped. I either was born blind in my left eye, or I lost that during the 1918 flu epidemic. A lot of people did lose their life or their eyesight. And even when I went to elementary school, the teacher let me go up to within arm's length to read whatever she had printed on the blackboard, because I only had one eye.

You just said something interesting that I'd like to go back to that there was an outbreak of the flu in 1918 here and a lot of people were sick in this area?

Yeah. Of course, I was only 3 years old so I don't remember, but they tell me, in fact, it was worldwide there were thousands of people killed, died from that all over the world, they tell me. But in this family, I guess we got through it. But I do have two brothers and one sister that didn't live to any age at all, just a month or two. Infant mortality in those days was quite common.

What would you do . . . who were some of the doctors? Did you have to go to New London?

Well back then doctors would come visit you, visit your house. No, I don't recall that anybody ever went to a doctor then because there was no hospital—no hospital in New London. I'm not even sure if there was a hospital as near as Franklin which is about 20 miles away. But no hospital in this area.

Okay, so if you got sick the doctor came out to you.

Yes. And there were no telephones then so you just had to get word to them somehow. And, of course, we used to have . . . they're all deceased now but there was a doctor, William Clough, Sr. and my folks favorite doctor was Dr. Charles Lamson who lived in Elkins—that's about 2 ½ miles from here. I remember my mother said that once when she was pregnant she was down in the store and this Dr. Lamson was there and when she came in and there were several other men around, he said, "Well I see someone's been eating dried apples." Which she said sort of embarrassed her but she still liked him. And I suppose, I dunno, that I was born on the dining room table right in this house.

Well, I'd like to thank you very, very much, Frank, for sitting here and sharing some of your memories and reminiscing what life was like back then. Thank you very much!

You're very welcome.

Transcribed by Kim White
Copy edited by Mary Fanelli and Nancy Langley