

Henry and Annette Stevens Transcript

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Summary

In this documentary, Henry Langley Stevens and his wife Annette Stevens share stories of the Wilmot community and of their lives growing up in Wilmot, New Hampshire. This interview was recorded on August 12, 2010 by the Wilmot Historical Society volunteers Charles Thompson and Lindy Heim at Henry and Annette's home in Wilmot Flat, New Hampshire.

Transcript

Lindy Heim: This is August 12, 2010 and we are in the home of Annette and Henry Stevens to hear about growing up here in Wilmot. What's your full name?

Henry: Henry Langley Stevens.

Lindy: There's the Langley! And you were born in what year?

Henry: 1938, July 28th in North Wilmot.

Lindy: And you were born right on the farm?

Henry: Yes, right on the farm.

Lindy: And you lived there your whole growing up until you were 19.

Henry: Just across the town line on South Danbury Road. It was actually the third house on the left then, where Mary Lyn Ray lives now. They had maple syrup. They had a sugar house down there and stuff like that, and everybody had sugar houses. Either that or they made their own. Like I used to make my own, and I was on the farm up there when I moved down here.

Every two years I'd tap John Morse's trees, or whoever's, and bring scrap wood home from work and make five or six gallons; that was enough to go for two years.

Lindy: Are there any stories about you as a baby that had roamed around the family?

Annette: Yes. About Grandpa's cider.

Henry: Oh I guess I was about two and a half, three years old. My grandfather always had a barrel of cider, that's the only thing Gram would allow was cider. You could get drunk on the cider, that was all right, but if you got drunk on beer or liquor that was terrible! Isn't that funny? He always took me down there, and they couldn't find me one day.

And that was back when they had sewing circles. Oh yeah once or twice a month. Well they had a big thing coming that day, a lot of women coming. Well like finally they look down cellar, and there I was drunker than a skunk, I couldn't even stand up. I guess my

mother come down she said I drank all the bubble cider or something like that. It was funny.

Lindy: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Henry: I had one brother and two sisters. one my brother, I got Nancy and Leah are twins; my other sister she's, what. Marie she's in Concord, a year and a half just about a year and a half younger than I am. I had an uncle, more of a father to me than my own father really, Bob Stewart. He just took me hunting he started me fishing when I was young and starting her out hunting when I was young, and uh but we didn't do nothing I mean, we stayed down be nothing to stay right there for a week like you know. When you were young you didn't travel. you didn't have the money to travel if you did you just like I used to ride my bike down to South Danbury then somebody come bring me a right home but the we kid down that way some of my relations. we used to go down play ball and stuff like that. but my grandmother Stevens she lived down there too, but we my grandmother had borders in the summertime so you know that kept us busy haying with my grandfather and stuff like that when were kids and stuff.

When I was a kid growing up there was more farms than there was in '57 because a lot of them went out before then. But Willard Ford's family was one in particular because it was right on the Danbury Wilmot line, and they used to, the Selectman used to come around assessing the property on April 1st for the taxes and they used to count all the livestock cows chickens pigs and everything. and so he'd take his animals and stick them on one side of the barn then the Danbury (selectmen) would be there and they'd stick them on the other side of the barn.

We had a lot of farms back then. North Wilmot alone there was six or seven.

Howard Atwood's—

Annette: Howard Atwood—was his grandfather

Henry: That was the farm I was born and brought up on. Chan Sawyer's, Cindy Sergeant's.

Then the Clay farm. I don't remember that one really working. Myron Langley's, Fred Lajoie when he lived in North Wilmot. He had a farm on top of the hill over there. Clint Fowler's....

Lindy: What were you most of the crops or animal life?

Henry: Cattle. There was just cattle, mostly cattle. And a lot of 'em had horses to work with, and some of them had steers to work with. But when the tractors come in, and of course everything else went out, but my Grandfather was strictly hosses. He died in the spring of '58, and that's all he ever used was hosses and stuff, and that's how I was born and brought up. When I got old enough to drive that's what I done, drive the hosses and stuff.

Annette: They had big gardens too didn't they?

Henry: Well, everybody had big gardens because they didn't have no freezers. Didn't have no refrigerators. We had all ice boxes, and we used to cut our ice at White's Pond which was on Howard Atwood's Farm - on White's Pond. That's right where Camp Wilmot is now - or used to be. That's another thing that bugged me too.

Annette: Henry's grandmother used to do a lot of canning for proctor academy. That's why they had big gardens. She would do two and a half quart canning jars of vegetables and

Henry: They'd bring most of the vegetables with them, but everybody had big gardens back then they had though to survive. And pigs, most of the time they had pigs, chickens... You know somebody'd come for dinner unexpected. They'd go out in the barn and kill a chicken and have it in no time flat. Always had something to eat. You never had to worry about food back then.

My grandfather was a road agent. Back then we had I remember two road agents. One in this section and one in north section. But I guess they used to have five or six (road agents) because they had drags and didn't have any graders. I forget what year we got our first grader. It was back in probably, I'd say probably '51 or '52, somewhere along in there, and Bob Patten was the road agent down here, or Howard, was the road agent, and they swapped back and forth the grader, swap back and forth between the two. Things had changed a lot.

When I got my license I drove the grader. I plowed with it in the wintertime. In '57 we had - I think is was in March - we had five feet land in two different snowstorms - a three- footer and a two-footer. I just got home from one of the big storms. I didn't even undress. She fed me supper, and I laid on the couch and went to sleep, and she was pounding on me in about three or four hours - had to start plowing again. I had almost a hundred hours in that week - driving.

We had the old cleat track. You remember that Charles?

Charles: I do indeed... the chain fall...

Henry: and how the chain fall held up by the wings. it took three men to run it. Yeah, you know they switched back and forth. One storm.... but that's what the main thing they had to plow with when they started. First, it'd be down here for one storm, then after it's cleaned up here, they'd go up Wilmot Center. That way and they'd switch back and forth. We got snowed in up there three days one time.

Annette: That bad storm, you ended up - you lost the road by Cappy LeVarn's

Henry: Yeah, I lost the road with the grader. I spent the night at Cappy's. Yeah, I stayed right there. A good thing he had a telephone, and I just called her up said "I'll see you when I get there."

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Yeah, we got things ... people don't realize how easy they got it now compared to what we had back then. Seventy-five cents an hour for driving and the road agent had a dollar and a quarter an hour back then. But you know it's different. Things weren't so high priced back then. You could actually buy gas, five gallons for a dollar you know back then.

Charles: Now did you live right opposite your grandfather?

Henry: Just on top of the hill - the next house down below Clara's. Well, we was married in '57. The only time I left town was for about three weeks maybe a month.

Annette: I'll give you the month!

Henry: We was in Concord over on the heights where the playground is now. We had a house there we rented for 35 dollars a month. She come home one night and I said "pack your bags. We're getting out of here."

Annette: I had a job when we got married and he didn't.

Henry: I had one that wasn't.....

Annette: and I worked in Concord so we had the apartment in Concord so I wouldn't have to travel.

Henry: I worked at Brezner Tannery.

Annette: Back then Loudon Road was like Wilmot Flat is now. It was the city. He wasn't having it.

Henry: I was making good money down there. And then they put me on hand finishing - like I knew I was gonna get fired. I couldn't keep up because the women in there, they took all the good stuff, and I was getting all the crap and I just wasted more clothes getting all that stain on me. A lot of people worked there. Yeah it was a good paying job. It was hand finishing suede.

The first real job I ever had, they took social security out, we built Campground Road. I worked for the state back then. We had to spread sand off the back of the truck because it was penetration. And we had bicycle sanders. They couldn't back up or they'd run over them. We had put enough sand to keep the asphalt from bleeding up through. I had started off with Wilbur Grace. He cramped up. Harry Hunt had somebody else. You jumped off of one truck because it had only had three or four yards on it then. 10 hours. One truck to another truck all day long. Who I ended up with was Harry Hunt. So I worked between her father's saw mill and driving for the town.

And when the snow got so deep, we just couldn't do any more in the woods, and stuff this two-man operation - her father and I - before skidders - would log and we had two big international tractors and stuff, and I was scared to death coming down there with

about a thousand feet of logs right behind me. You had to steer the scoot. That's before the skidders come in.

Lindy: What was your job Annette?

Annette: I worked at Farm Bureau Insurance. Now it's Concord Group, back when they were on Main Street. They used to be right almost right across from Sears Roebuck when Sears was on Main Street.

Henry: The same year I got out of high school I asked her to marry me. We asked to be married up the North Wilmot Church. We was the second couple ever got married in that church. What gets me, they, in the InterTown Record, they named Piper Pond Road. They never named Tewksbury Road. There's three roads right there that come in right by the church, and they only named two out of the three. But you know it's an intersection because that's the road from Tewksbury. That's why the church has moved down to the bottom of the hill.

Annette: They used our wedding pictures when the church was broken into and all the antique lanterns were stolen. Now the chandelier, they didn't get that because they couldn't guess the way it was fastened up. They couldn't get it out. But those were the only photographs that they had to show the insurance adjuster.

Henry: I shingled that church twice. Once with another guy, Wayne Atwood, and once when I was in business. And once I shingled the Wilmot Center Church. So many people never knew about the church on the top of the hill.

Charles: yeah that was a big Methodist church on top of the hill. Just got it all painted. Yeah that was Woodard. He just got his all his equipment out that day that the lightning struck it. I see the bolt that struck it. It hit with three fingers that come out of that. The royal town lodge in Springfield burned that night. The church in Wilmot Center burned down. The Ragged Mountain Fishing and Game. They got three structure fires from that one bolt that come down through—all simultaneously.

Annette: He was on the road from Andover to Wilmot when he saw that.

Henry: And people don't realize you know, we got one road coming off 4A. There used to be a fork right there. Bill Carl of course, he lived right in the house right next to the church. And we had one of the old hand cranks sirens and Bill was right there just a cranking his dear life away.

Everything was over in just a split second.

That church was - the whole thing was like BANG! And it was all on fire because it split the steeple. When that bell was almost sitting right on the doorstep where it landed. That's right. It came right down through. Come right straight down and split like a wedge. And we didn't have the equipment. Andover went, of course, was at Ragged Mountain Fish and Game. New London went to Royal - time they left and come down to here to help us out - but we've made it to Connie Forsham's house and started putting

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water on that to keep the heat away. That was all because, you know, the old structure. And what hurt us the most, because it was a metal ceiling, and it all comes right down on top, so we just let it burn. Yeah, I mean not everything was gone, but it was all gone within an hour and a half.

Annette: The first night we moved into our house, we were married in '57, we got to talking one night at my grandfather's kitchen he said "why don't you go pick your piece of land out you want to build your house on." so I said, "well we'll build it right up the road."

We got all the lumber off his farm and her father and another guy had the sawmill, so we just took it down there and sawed it out. No mortgage. No planning board back then.

Annette: You didn't have to have a building permit. That first Christmas we moved into the house on Christmas Eve. We had no water, no running water, no bathroom.

Henry: My uncle was across the street. Of course we were young, well I was 19 and you were 18. I'd gone before the judge to get married down in Concord. Then take my mother down, and the judge says, "you gotta get married?" We says "no." Well, he looked at both of us and he said, "Well why don't you? I'm going to write you up because you might as well because you might..."

Annette: You might as well before you *have* to.

Henry: He was quite an old character I don't know whoever his name was.

Annette: I don't remember either.

Henry: But you know it was an interesting time. That Christmas, we had just uh the insulation. Was the old insulation that was the foil and that's what our walls were. We plugged in the Christmas tree. We had Christmas trees all around us reflecting on the insulation. And the next spring we finished it all off. We liked to froze to death that winter though.

We'd been there, what, three years, four years. Mark was born then Michael was born. We said let's get a mortgage on the house. We went to Franklin bank. We figured we'd never get one at New London Trust. It had just barely started. We borrowed four thousand dollars to put a 26 x 36-foot addition.

Annette: My father had a fit when he found out we had a mortgage. What were we doing putting our house in jeopardy!

Henry: \$47 a month. Then we sold the house right in the middle of winter.

I owned this piece of land back of the woods where Gavin Campbell is now, and bought that piece the following summer. We put the house on the market. Sold the house in February, we moved in the end of March. Frost was that deep in that sand. A month to the day later, we signed the papers. I was working for Woodard then, it was a pre-fab

that come out of the Millis, Mass. I had five-man crew and Gordon Ordway had five men. We made the National Home Building magazine. We put up 75 houses. I was on the road most of the time.

Lindy: You have had two sons and a daughter?

Henry: Two sons. Michael works down in Manchester. He works down Newfields - about 60 to 70 hours a week. They got him on salary, and he's pretty much running the factory down there.

Charles: Did you play baseball in high school?

Henry: I played baseball since I was probably three years old.

Annette: It was neat though because we were all reasonably young at that point. None of us had any money. We all had kids, you know, and so we'd pack picnic lunches and follow the guys wherever the ball game was. And the kids would have a good time playing, and we, you know, we girls would do our own things, and it was all we could afford to do. That was our social life.

Lindy: Where was the ballfield?

Henry: Oh, right there by Proctor. Where the ballfield is now. They moved that around three different times just like our ballfield over here (in Wilmot).

The original ball field home plate went right through Route 11. I've redone that ball field three times. I put the underground sprinkler system in when we done it the last time.

The 368 engineers were all there working, and then they come down here. We put the beach in (Timmy Patten Park) and we'd be thrown in jail today if we've had done it now like we did then. We had to have a tank retriever come in and get a D8 out. They got a little island out there. It's gone now. They brought a crane in. They took all the muck out. That was nothing but a swamp. Yeah, I mean we clear cut that whole thing. It was absolutely nothing but a junky swamp.

Now we got a nice beach out of it. We spent every stinking night there after that beach got in. All the guys our age—Stanley Rayno, Keith Fleury, Al Hansen. They lived in Wilmot Center Hill. And all the kids were the same age. Most of the time we ate supper down there. Everybody would bring stuff, and we'd all eat together and stuff like that.

Annette: Guys would play horseshoes because they could go onto the island at that point.

Henry: We had a bridge and I guess Sumner Woodard found out maybe we didn't own that island, but that's why the bridge never got put back in.

Annette: But there was a little enclosure with building on it that was open to the weather but at least it was where you could get in out of the rain.

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Henry: That building right there where the bathrooms are, it was over at Dick Bacon's, and I think it was an old railroad shed because I dunno where it come from.

But Lonnie Rowe was alive then. He had his construction business and a tag-along trailer. He said "it ain't gonna be any problem to move that," and I said "let me tell you something, it's gonna be a problem because that slate roof weighs some lot of pounds and stuff. "Well," I said "don't get excited" I said, "I'll go home get a couple of plank and some rolls" and we rolled it right up onto his trailer. That sat right over a big septic tank right there, and then he had to come pump it out all the time; they still do.

We unloaded it, and it was getting dark. It was really pitched black out when you unloaded that. She come right off almost perfect ...right where we wanted it to set and that's where she set ever since.

We didn't pay any money to have the work done. Like the ball field – we didn't have any money to pay. Like the Community Center – I worked hundreds of hours in there. I was living in North Wilmot then. Refurbished the whole thing. Ripped it all out. And I done all the ceilings. And the bottom one. Never had lung cancer you know. Then we didn't have masks and all that stuff. Was done for nothing. Now everything's got to be paid for.

Henry: Then we had bingo – that's another thing that supported the Community Center – when we take turns. I called bingo, you know, and John Spearman would call. John and I'd be calling. We'd switch off back and forth one week, next week, and stuff like that. But we had all the people that donated their time, and that's why all the kids benefited from it because it didn't cost an arm and a leg. There wasn't that many big dollars then and stuff like that. But you did the work. I mowed the ball field for years.

Annette: You did the work for the organizations that your kids were involved in and then when they moved on to something else then you moved on.

Henry: I was close by, and I'd have to take a can of gas with me because I had a riding lawnmower and stuff. And when I was playing softball, I kept it up too. Then the irrigation system. When we got done playing softball that's when the field started goin' to pot.

Lindy: We're about out of time, and you guys have been wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.

Henry: A lot of change has been going on over the years for good and for bad, but you know, everybody worked together back then. We didn't have any new houses going in then.

Lindy: Well Wilmot's a choice place to live now for young people. We've got mixed ages.

Henry: we're centrally located between Concord and Hanover.

Lindy: exactly

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Henry: Yeah and easy access

Lindy: Yep. It is now because you're right so close to the end of state, and there are a lot of families on my street where their mom works in one direction the dad works in the other so we're central for that same reason.

Henry: Yeah, I never knew where I was going to work. I was on the road all the time. I mean I traveled from Vermont to Mass. building houses during the week. Nearly built me a house in Burlington. I'd a had a house for nothing as long as I stayed up there and built the houses while working on the end of Lake Champlain.

Lindy: well we enjoyed your stories thanks so much for sharing with us.

Annette: well thank you for coming you brought back a lot of memories.