

Tootie Fleury and Duke Evans Transcript

05/23/22 Interview

Summary

In this documentary, Patricia (Tootie) Fleury and her brother Donald (Duke) Evans share stories of their life and growing up in Wilmot, New Hampshire. This interview, by Wilmot Historical Society member Liz Kirby, was held at the home of Duke Evans, in Franklin, New Hampshire, on May 24, 2022.

Transcript

Liz Kirby: Today is May 24th, 2022. My name is Liz Kirby and I'm with the Wilmot Historical Society and we're going to do a conversation with Duke Evans and Pat Fleury. We call her Toots because that's what we called her back in the days, and I still do. Duke, tell us where you were born and where you were raised.

Donald (Duke) Evans: I was born in New London Hospital, the old hospital before they built the new one, and I was raised right there in Wilmot Flat, until I was 18, and I got married and moved away.

Liz: And Toots, how about you?

Patricia (Tootie/Toots) Fleury: The same. We were all born in New London Hospital and we're just a year apart. There's four of us in the family. My sister Betty's the oldest, then Duke, and then myself, and then Rod.

Liz: Tell me about your parents. Are they from around here?

Tootie: Both of them were born and raised right in Wilmot. My mother's parents (Crouse), were both born and raised in Nova Scotia and they came to Maine first and then somehow ended up in Wilmot, New Hampshire, and that's where my mother was born. My father's father – they were both from New Hampshire anyway. (turns to Duke to ask "Do you know where they...")

Duke: Pa was born on the road that goes out from Walker Brook Road to Eagle Pond Road, in that little house before it dips down in the hollow where Wells Brook runs through there. He was born in that house right there. And I think mother was born right there in George Wrest's - the house that burned. I'm pretty sure she was born right there.

Liz: What kind of work did your father do Duke?

Duke: Well, he worked out in the woods. He used to cut pulp all during the war and some logs. Then he went to work on the Mink Farm, and he ran that Mink Farm on 4A. He ran that right up until, I guess, just about the time it closed, when everybody stopped wearing mink and they kind of outlawed it, so everybody went out of business.

Liz: Toots, did your mom work outside the home?

(final edit 4/22/23 by mf)

Tootie: When I was... I believe I was in high school before she started working for Freedom Acres. She was probably one of the first people who worked for them, before they even started... or maybe around the time they started making their jellies.

I can remember Kay White, who was one of the WACs (Women's Army Corps) as we call them, was going to Boston and my mother and I rode down with her. And she was soliciting orders for the jellies that they sold, and she was going to different businesses where she knew these people. And she had us go right in the office with her, and I could remember sitting there, I was just a young teenager and pretty impressed with going into Boston and in these offices of lawyers. I don't even know what the positions were, but some people that she knew, and most of them gave her orders.

Liz: Duke, what are your earliest memories of your life at home with the family?

Duke: Rod burning the barn maybe. I went down, and he was up on the scaffold and I saw the barn and the barn door was all ablaze. It was a stack of hay finally tumbled off from the barn. Rod had got up there and he was lighting matches and throwing it down on the hay. I told him, "jump down." He jumped down, I got him out of there and went back. There was a big rock by the apple tree over across the driveway, and I run like a son of a gun for mother, she was up in the garden, up further in, her and Wayne Cheney's wife, Frances, and they were up there picking beans. She said, "You keep running Dukie, and you get up there to the Baker's and have him call the fire department." And that was in New London – Wilmot didn't have one then. So, I called and by the time I got back down to the house, quite a few people were there. Grandpa Crouse was there. And he was a little fellow, and he stayed up on that pitcher pump all day long until the fire was out, pumping water out of the well, and that well held out, so he pumped steady. And they brought buckets in brigade out through there, you know, out through the shed. The shed was on fire. The whole end of the shed burned off, but if it hadn't been for him pumping water, nobody else would have done that, I don't think. But he saved the house and the shed too. Father had to board the shed up.

Liz: Where did you both go to school?

Tootie: Oh, we went to the school in Wilmot Flat. It was the one-room schoolhouse, all eight grades there. It's the same school my mother went to, and two of my kids went to that school for two grades. Then it became the Town Office when Wilmot joined in with other towns to form the Kearsarge Regional School District.

Liz: So, you spent eight years in Wilmot Flat School with Mrs. LaPierre. What special things did Mrs. LaPierre teach that maybe weren't taught otherwise by other teachers; music and so forth?

Duke: She was good with music. She used to play piano, and we all sang and stuff like that. But she taught out of the book, so she kept us right up on all the current stuff, and she talked about the war and told us what was going on in the war, in case we didn't get it at home. Of course, we had to set there [at home], because father had a radio that he rigged up, and he wanted to listen to news every night, so we had to be quiet. And you

could go outdoors, but in wintertime you didn't want to go outdoors, so we heard that whether we wanted to or not.

Liz: Do you remember about when the war started?

Duke: I remember when they had VJ Day, Victory over Japan. Father went down to Tex Pollock's. There was Tex and father, Wayne Cheney, Alan Mitchell. They'd run out of rum and they went up to get the key off my mother from my grandfather Crouse's house. And he had a keg of cider down cellar and they got into that. And they celebrated the VJ Day all right. [It was] one of the few days that father took off from work. He worked almost every day. He either worked or hunted and when he went hunting or fishing, he usually brought home some game or fish to eat.

Tootie: That's what fed us.

Duke: We were with well fed, for darn sure. We had all kinds of gardens and stuff like that, and he kept them up good too; he kept the gardens good.

Tootie: We had to pick the potato bugs and tomato worms off too. I hated that, picking them bugs off.

Liz: After you left Wilmot Flat School, tell me what happened next Duke?

Duke: I went to Andover High School for four years, graduated, and had a good time down there. I spent two years waiting for the Andover kids and South Danbury kids to catch up. We were doing the same stuff that we'd done in grade school. So, I kind of lost interest. And in the last two years they let me go up to the garage to work for Les Ford all afternoon, and he had to pay me. That was one of the things, he had to pay me fifty cents an hour, which was all right with me. It's better than going down to some class there that I didn't care about. So, I'd get my classes all done in the morning and George Corson set it up so I could get down in the projection room and study, which was good too because I could go down there where it was quiet. I'd get my homework all done, so I didn't have any to do when I get home.

Liz: Toots, what do you remember about Andover High?

Tootie: Well, I played basketball, and I was fortunate enough to get on first string on the basketball team when I was a sophomore. Because when I was a freshman all the first string were seniors, so they all graduated and most of us were sophomores that took over on the first string for three years. And we ended up, our senior year, being the state champions in our division. So, it was pretty good for little old Andover High School. And we played basketball in the Town Hall then. We did not have a gym, so we practiced after school. I'd have to walk home from practice a number of times and sometimes I would stay, and Sam Clark, I could ride home with him, if he was going home. He was one of our teachers, and he was the boys' coach. So, I had to wait until the boys got through practice. Depending on how cold it was, sometimes I would wait so I could ride home with Sam Clark.

Liz: When you weren't in high school, did you go hunting or something like that?

Duke: Yeah, we used to hunt a lot. I always had a gun in the car. Now I guess you can't even take one on school grounds. But I always had my gun, like most of the kids that had cars – they had a gun in them – a shot gun or rifle in deer season. And we never got in trouble with them. Nobody ever got them out of the car.

Liz: I definitely want to cover you as the Postmistress – Postmaster.

Tootie: Well, you can call me Postmistress and then I'll tell you – I wasn't the mistress of the town of Wilmot – I was nobody's mistress.

Liz: Then I will ask you that!

Tootie: I didn't get paid enough to be the mistress of the town of Wilmot – is what I used to say! We were always Postmasters. And I can tell you how it got the name, from when the mail was delivered by the trains, and there would be a post hanging outside the stations, and they hung the mail on there. And that's how the Postmaster – Master of the Post – got the name of Postmaster. So, no, we're not Postmistresses – I was a Postmaster – and proud of it.

Liz: Yes, ma'am.

Tootie: Well, I was very, very fortunate that I got a job working in the Post Office, and I worked there from 1968—I believe it was '68—until I retired 31 years later.

Liz: So you saw a lot of things happening in Wilmot during those 31 years.

Tootie: I certainly did; yes.

Liz: What do you remember specifically that stands out in your mind?

Tootie: When I first started working, Freedom Acres were shipping a lot of their jams and jellies out of the Post Office. The first two years I believe I worked for them, we went up there at night and bagged some packages and the truck went right up there in the morning and picked them up.

We had a number of other businesses that, small businesses, that were in town and two medical type mailing ones that sent out a large volume of mail out of my office. People used to come in from Andover and mail things. I loved that job. I always said I had the best job in town, of course it was the only job in town.

Twenty years after I retired, people would say, "I still miss you." And I miss the people, I really do – the families, the kids. And a lot of kids would come in and give me hugs, and I miss all that.

Liz: Your kids are grown and you have grands and greats.

Tootie: I have four granddaughters and one grandson. And I have two great-grandsons and one great-granddaughter, who is 18. One of my great-grandsons lives just a couple miles from me, so that's nice I get to see him; Calvin's his name.

Liz: Duke, you told me that you met your wife in high school.

Duke: Yes.

Liz: Did you get married immediately after high school?

Duke: Within a month and a half, I guess. My older sister, Betty, her husband [Fred] stove his car up in East Andover, he had a new one. And he came up [from Florida] and he used to live in East Andover and his father worked at that Power Station, where the machine shop is now. So, he was way down there wavin', and it happened to be a Catholic priest was coming up, and that bridge is on the corner, and they plowed into each other and stove his [Fred's] car up pretty good.

And the priest said, "I don't know what happened. I never seen it," but his [Fred's] car was a brand new one. So, Little's Garage, a Chevrolet place, took it up to New London. But they couldn't get the parts for it, I don't know, it must have been six weeks or a little more. So, he asked me if he could my take my car to go home [to Florida] in. And I said, "yeah, I'll let you have it." So, I had a car that was about a year old then. So, he took that and headed out with it. And when his got fixed, I took his down – and that was our honeymoon. We probably wouldn't have got married quite so early, but I wanted her to go with me, and so that's when we got married.

Liz: So, your trip was to get the car to where?

Duke: Winter Haven, Florida. Not Winter Haven...

Tootie: Pensacola.

Duke: Yeah, Pensacola.

Tootie: Fred was in the Air Force. That's why he had to get back home because Fred was on leave.

Liz: Fred was your oldest sister Betty's husband.

Duke: Yep.

Liz: Okay, and they were living in Florida at the time.

Duke: Yes.

Liz: During that timeframe, what kind of work were you doing?

Duke: I would have been working for Granger, except for, over at Croydon, you've probably seen those ledges when you're going up 89, we were fighting forest fire up

there almost every day. And Wilmot would draft me, and then Danbury would draft me. Well, every time Danbury paid, Wilmot paid 90 cents an hour and then Danbury paid a dollar and five cents. So, just as soon as John Rayno would draft me, I tell him, I'd say, "I already signed up for Danbury."

And so I got over and signed up with Phil Chellis or Myrl Phelps. They're both firefighter agents and they would take us over, and neither one of them would get out and get up into the fire because they was older. Myrl was kind of a boss-type anyway and Phil was too. And I don't think either one of them woulda amounted to anything if they'd gone into fire. But they'd drive us over, and they'd stand around and wait for us, and we'd do about a 12-hour day, I think pretty near every day.

I remember the last day I was up there though. We cut this fire lane, it was about 100 yards wide, and we scraped it right out of the bare dirt. And Dana Aldrich comes up with a package of food and cigarettes and gum and all that stuff. So I got a pack of cigarettes off him and a sandwich. And he said, "boy you better get out of here. You better come right down the hill with me." He said, "I'm leaving."

"Oh," I said, "I can't leave. I got this already here. I'm going to stop the fire right here." There was a bunch of Frenchmen in the crowd and not one in them could speak English, I don't think. The fire jumped the lane right where them fellows were. If they'd stayed right there and fought it, they would have gotten it out. Because it jumped the lane where I was, but we got right over there and got it out. So, there was very little of it, but it lay right down over us. Those flames were just as high as you could see. When they come onto that stretch it was about 100 yards and you could see how high the flames was. And that air was hot and burning right up in there in the air.

And Dana was scared half to death, and I would have been if I'd had any brains, but at that time I thought I could lick the world, you know, and I tried it anyway. Anyway, we lost the fire, and we got trapped in ... well, we didn't get trapped, we knew our way out. Governor Greg was there, the old man, he flew over in an airplane and he claimed he led us out of there. We knew where we were going anyway, we we're going to get out of the fire and we're going back down around it then. But that was the last day I was up there. And I got back home I got married the next night.

Liz: So, you learned your carpenter's trade by doing it with other people?

Duke: Yeah, pretty much. You know there was a lot happening, and I was on my own. I was lost then, I knew I didn't know nothing. But I had some good help. I had some boys and all I wanted was high school dropouts. I didn't want anybody to do anything, because I didn't know what I was doing, and I had my way of doing it, and I wanted it done that way. And everybody seemed to be pretty reasonably happy with what I done for them. So I kep it up, until I had this infection there. What do you call that?

Tootie: Staph infection.

Duke: Staph infection. Most people died from it. I should have. I'd have been better off, I guess. But I'm glad I lived, because I got Betsy, who took such good care of me, and I

was able to take care of her when she had cancer and died; I took care of her. I'm glad I lived long enough do that.

Liz: So, how many children do you have?

Duke: Two. A boy and a girl. The daughter was born with spina bifida. She lives in Cilleyville. My son married down in ... he lives in Manchester, out on ... towards Goffstown, sort of like the country, you know. I never was there, but I know about where it is.

Liz: Grandchildren?

Duke: I got one grandson; my daughter had a grandson – a nice kid – nice guy.

Liz: Who do you think is the most influential person that you've ever had in your life?

Duke: I'm going to say my Daddy. His father was fully as much to Steve Evans. You ever know him? No? He was very religious and he told me, I used to spend a lot of time up with him in the camp, and he taught me a lot about being good to people, being honest. He was a nice guy.

Liz: Toots, how about you what's the most influential person that you've ever known in your life?

Tootie: That's a good question. I don't know that I have an answer, but certainly my parents, both of them. But I agree, Grandpa Evans was an uneducated man. I don't think he went more than ... did he go in sixth grade even in school?

Duke: He didn't. He went to first grade.

Tootie: First grade and I don't think he had much schooling or anything.

Liz: Is there anything else that you'd like to reminisce about Wilmot or the people that you knew there?

Tootie: Well, I was thankful that I worked in the Post Office and got to know, like your parents as me being an adult, knowing them as a kid, and then getting to meet and know them as an adult. And appreciating them, where I didn't appreciate them when I was young. So, that was a treat for me to know people like Van Rayno and John Rayno. And the parents of the kids that I went to school with ended up being very good friends, where in school, I didn't really know them—and was quite afraid of them if anything.

Liz: Toots, Duke, this has been very enjoyable. Thank you so very, very much.

Duke: You're quite welcome.

Tootie: Well I thank you.

Duke: Thank you both.

Tootie: Yeah, thank you.

CREDITS

Wilmot Historical Society

Interviewer: Liz Kirby

Music

Autumn Day

The following music was used for this media project:

"Autumn Day" Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com)

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