

Memories of Wilmot with Clayton Nowell

Lindy Heim: We are here today on October 25, 2017 to interview Clayton Nowell, who has lived in Wilmot a long time, and it is the Wilmot Historical Society that's conducting this interview. Assisting with the videography is Judy Hauck, Christine Jenssen, myself, Lindy Heim and conducting the interview is Liz Kirby.

We are all going to enjoy this time together. We're going to sit back and relax and pretend we're just visiting and hear about Clayton Nowell's life.

We're conducting this interview at my home on Campground Road in Wilmot Flat. Here we go.

Liz Kirby: When did you first live in Wilmot?

Clayton Nowell: Well I moved up in 1949 from Franklin. Why did I move to Wilmot?

Liz: Yeah

Clayton: Well, because we fell in love with it. Yeah. My second-grade teacher, Florence Jackman, owned the farm. And when she told us she had to go into a nursing home, and we used to come up summers and visit weekends and stuff. So, she sold the farm to my brother and then we moved up here.

Liz: How many were there in your family that moved?

Clayton: Well there were six all together. Six boys.

Liz: And your parents?

Clayton: And my parents.

Liz: What kind of work did you do when you moved up here? You were out of high school – is that right?

Clayton: No, I didn't graduate. I went through 11 years and when I moved up here there was no way that I could get to Franklin to finish it. So, I bought a team of horses and started logging with my neighbor.

Liz: Did you do that year-round?

Clayton: Yes. Did that for a number of years.

Liz: Wow! Now were you in the military?

Clayton: Yeah. I got drafted.

Liz: What branch?

Clayton: Army Signal Corps. And I spent 14 months in the Korean conflict. It was a tactical air control team.

Liz: Where did you go to boot camp?

Clayton: I went to Fort Dix.

Liz: Oh in New Jersey?

Clayton: Yes.

Liz: When you came home from the service and got discharged what did you do?

Clayton: There wasn't much work or anything else available and I had sold the team of horses. So, I went to work with Myrl Phelps from Danbury. He was caretaker of the Ploughman farm and the owner of that was the, you know, vice president of US Steel. Myrl Phelps was the caretaker, and I was just over helping him. I was doing all the work of course. He was the brains – I was the brawn.

Liz: There you go that's the way it was in those days wasn't it?

Clayton: And then from there I worked with Myrl for years and years, helping him hay and everything else. And from there after that I went to work over at IPC, International Packing Corporation, in Bristol for a number of years. And then from that I went down to Hudson Door. Managed to work there for about two weeks and quit. Then I went to with J. P. Stevens down there in Franklin.

Liz: What did they manufacture at J.P. Stevens?

Clayton: Cloth. Woolen products mostly. Cloth that they sold.

Liz: What job did you have there?

Clayton: Well first of all I was in the winding department. They had so much work that I worked a second shift, which consisted of working from four o'clock (in the afternoon) until seven o'clock in the morning. (Laughs) Two double shifts. I had one other guy that was working with me, and I was an inspector and a winder – the whole nine yards.

Then they (the company) finally moved south and from there I went to work for Hudson Door and you know some of these other ones. Then I worked with Hadley Foods. Mel Capparos, Dave Hadley, had this Hadley Foods. Delivered dairy products. You know, Colombo Yogurt was the main thing, and they had all these creamers for coffee, and we sold to restaurants and stores and stuff. I worked for them for, I don't know, I guess ten years.

Liz: What did you do for them? What kind of work?

Clayton: I was a truck driver. I covered a lot of territory, mostly Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and some in Maine.

Liz: When did you join the Grange, and was it helpful to you to be a Grange member?

Clayton: I think it was 1950. Matter of fact when I was over in Korea, I had the Grange send a bunch of stuff for the children over there. They had nothing.

Liz: Korean children?

Clayton: Yup. The country was devastated. There was all these orphans and stuff like that. So, I sent to the Grange, my mother and stuff, and they sent a bunch of packages with clothing and food and stuff over there. It was about four months after I got there that they signed the cease fire, so we were on standby most of the time.

Liz: It must have been a very different different thing to see that what you have been used to here in New Hampshire.

Clayton: It was pretty much about the same winter. I was above the 38th parallel, which is comparable to Connecticut, but the winters were pretty brutal over there.

Liz: Did you hold any town offices in the town of Wilmot or participate in any of the town activities?

Clayton: Yeah, I was at one time president of the Planning Board.

Liz: You were a charter member of the Wilmot Historical Society and that kind of came about after the bicentennial celebration in 1976. Do you remember too much about what happened at the Bicentennial?

Clayton: Yeah, they a big parade and everything else and they had the play that was put on "The Birth of a Town" that was at that bicentennial. But they had a big parade in Wilmot Center. (Chuckles) I had my tractor down there with a trailer, with a big sign with a big heart, that I said, "I love Wilmot." I still got the heart up there in my attic.

Liz: What did you do for entertainment back in the 50s and 60s?

Clayton: Well, I just go to the hog rassles. That's what my father called them. Wilbur Grace used to have square dances every Saturday night in the town hall down in Wilmot. My father was chief of police for Wilmot for a number of years, and he was the police officer down there and kept the drunks in line and all that stuff. This was every Saturday night, the "hog rassles."

Liz: So, that was his term, your father's term, for keeping peace at the square dances. Is that right?

Clayton: Yup.

Liz: Okay. Was there any other kind of activity or entertainment available?

Clayton: Not much. We had television at home, but it was more like a watching a snowstorm than television. We used to ski all the time and stuff like that, and hunt and fish.

Liz: Back in the 60s and 70s there were a lot of plays and dramatic productions that were put on and you were one of the actors.

Clayton: Yep.

Liz: How often did you put a play on?

Clayton: I think they used to do 'em once or twice a year.

Liz: What kind of drama was it?

Clayton: It was mostly comedy.

Liz: All right. Do you remember the names of any of the of the plays that you did?

Clayton: Yeah one was "His Name was Nellie." I dressed up as a woman. There was quite a few of the other ones...different names, I can't remember all of them.

Liz: Was everybody in town involved in the acting and did you have a good audience also?

Clayton: We had a good audience, but they also...a lot of the members from town were in the plays.

Liz: How long have you been farming?

Clayton: All my life I fear.

Liz: What's your favorite farming activity?

Clayton: Making maple syrup...cutting firewood, mowing fields. I mowed pretty near every field in the town of Wilmot, Danbury, and Grafton, back a long time ago. Just to keep them from growing up.

Liz: Did you get keep the hay when you mowed it?

Clayton: Well, some of it I kept, but most of it I would just mow it down to keep the fields from growing up. Now most of them are grown up.

Liz: Are there still some open fields that you helped to keep that way?

Clayton: Oh, yeah.

Liz: Whereabouts for instance?

Clayton: Well one of them is Griffin's up in Wilmot. Some of them are up to Kimball's where Tom Vaughn lives. Some of them in Danbury are still mowable and some in Grafton are still...but a lot of them have grown up.

Liz: How about in the rest of the town of Wilmot? In Wilmot Flat and so forth? Did you ever come down that far from home?

Clayton: Oh, yeah. I was all the way up through to almost Kearsarge Valley Country Club. Eva French's and Chandler's field, and all these other ones.

Liz: Now in in the wintertime, did you help take care of the roads?

Clayton: Yup. Henry Stevens, Ralph Stevens, and I, and Howard Atwood were the road agents, and it was all hand labor. (Chuckles)

Liz: How so?

Clayton: There were no sand spreaders, there was no grader, actually it was just a tow bar grader and all of those, you know, when it come time for plowing in the winter and stuff, and Henry Stevens and I used to have to go down to the gravel bank in the winter, because they don't have storage or anything then, and we'd have to take a crowbar and dynamite and poke a hole through the frozen gravel, stick a dynamite in there, blow it out, and then shovel it into the truck by hand, shovel it off the truck by hand.

And now people complain that, you know, they didn't use to plow until there was a foot of snow at least, and everybody had chains and stuff, and nobody was going anywhere back then. It was a tough job.

Liz: When you and Henry were shoveling the sand, how did you do it?

Clayton: I would get in the back of the truck, I would stand one way and Henry would stand another away, and he'd take a shovel full and throw it, and then I'd pick a shovel full and throw it the other way, so that, you know, it would be by shovel fulls. A lot of times they'd have to back up the hill because you couldn't drive up, it was too icy.

Yeah, Howard Atwood would back up the hill, because you couldn't you couldn't drive up. We would have to back up, so we could sand the hills, particularly Teel Hill over there. That was the bad one. And of course, there was other ones in town up over where Chandler's lived, and Stearns Hill (laughs). We took care of the whole town.

Liz: Were you able to get everything done after one storm before the other storm came along?

Clayton: Well, sometimes no. We were snowed in our place for 14 days one time. Couldn't get out for 14 days. They had an old cleat track, and that broke down, so we ended up having Russ Jewell come in with his bulldozer, finally, and between the bulldozer and stuff we finally got it shoveled out. Then the next day, we had another storm and it drifted right in again, but not quite so bad.

Liz: You did other things besides work in the wintertime. I understand that you used to ski a lot. How did you start doing that?

Clayton: I started when I was age nine down home in, Massachusetts, and there was a hill there called Strawberry Hill. And it was just a hill, and I had a little pair of skis, so I go walk up the hill, and ski down, walk up the hill, and ski down. Fell in love with it. Been the downfall of me ever since.

Liz: When you came back from the Army, did you get right back into the skiing then?

Clayton: Yup. We used to ski at that little ski slope over there on Pleasant Lake, the New London Outing Club ran it, and it was just a little rope tow, and then they went and moved to King Hill, King Ridge over there. Every time I go by Pleasant Lake and I look over, and I cannot find where that ski area was because it's grown up so since then.

Liz: Now that ski area by Pleasant Lake, was it across the road from the lake?

Clayton: There was, as you go past the beach, and the road that goes in, and it was on the left-hand side on that road, not too awfully far in, but it's all built up with houses and stuff but, where the ski area was – it's all grown up.

Liz: When you get to the bottom of the ski slope, you had to stop before you cross the road, is that right?

Clayton: Oh, yeah.

Liz: If you didn't have good brakes on the skis you might get off the road.

Clayton: Skis back then, you had all you could do turn them, because they're different than the skis of nowadays.

Liz: How have the skis changed and how has skiing changed since then?

Clayton: Oh, now you got a lift, you got snowmaking, and snow grooming, and all this other stuff. Plus, the skis are shorter. I ski on ski boards, and they're shorter, they are rockered and have side cuts and everything else. Entirely different. The old skis were just straight and the only way you could actually turn with them was to kind of jump up and turn or you had to get going at least 30 miles an hour to be able to make a turn on them. Now these skis I got, I do ballet skiing and trick skiing and everything else you can imagine.

Liz: I understand that you have taught skiing.

Clayton: Yeah for 54 years I taught the area school kids over to Ragged. Last year was my last year of teaching. I'm not teaching this year. I used to just tell the kids "I taught your father how to ski." then I said to them, "You know I taught your grandfather how to ski." That's three generations.

Liz: Are the kids doing as well as their parents and grandparents did?

Clayton: Ah, well, they kind of got a little mind of their own, let me put it that way, which is not bad, because I'm the most stubborn person that you'll ever see in your life. If they said I couldn't do it – I would do it. As I say, I march to a different drummer.

Clayton: I taught my brother how to ski over at Ragged.

Lindy: They love you there.

Clayton: The first trip up was on the Bunny Slope, what they call the Barnyard, and you get off and you go down off the ramp, of course Buddy didn't know what to expect. He fell. So, we got him back up, and they had him on ski boards that I ski on, the short boards.

They made it down the hill and about half a dozen runs on the Barnyard, and then he went to the top and never fell the rest of the day. And he's a better skier now than I am. I hate to admit it, but he's a better skier, because he's ten years younger. But he comes over and goes skiing and I go over and go skiing at the Middlebury College snowboarding with him.

But he's, like I say, because he worked for the St. Regis Paper Company, and he was a forester, but he spent all his time outdoors...over in Maine, and New Hampshire, and New York. So, he had good balance from being in the lumber yards and stuff. But he's a better skier than I am. I'm not sorry to admit it.

Lindy: Because you were his teacher.

Clayton: I keep telling him you know. I get him up to the top and I said. "I'm going to take it easy." I make about two turns and that's the end of being easy. And then he says, "I thought you said you were going to take it easy!" And I says, "Well I did."

Lindy: So how old was he when you taught him?

Clayton: This was about ten years ago

Lindy: So, it was later in life

Clayton: Yup.

Liz: I understand there's a great wall of Wilmot on your property up on Grafton Road, how did that come about?

Clayton: Well I decided to some tapping on a piece of land that belonged to Mike Boyle on the opposite side from my house, and it was an old logging road that went down there, and it was terrible, terrible. And to get in and out of that you needed four-wheel drive and then some. So, I finally bought a tractor with a backhoe on it, so what I did was I'd go down and I'd dig out all the rocks. And I'd bring them up, and put them aside to build a stonewall with. Then I'd take a load of gravel down into the road, and by doing it, it took me three years to finish that stonewall.

Liz: Well how did you learn to build a stonewall that was so perfectly square?

Clayton: Well, by stacking wood for one thing. It's the same thing as stacking wood.

Liz: What do you think was the best thing about living in Wilmot?

Clayton: The people. They're all friendly. Everybody knew everybody.

Liz: Is there anything special that you would like to see change in Wilmot?

Clayton: I would like to see less subdivision, but it's inevitable. Since I retired, I've worked harder now than when I was working for other people.

Lindy: And why is that?

Clayton: Because I enjoy work. I enjoy what I'm doing. I get up at daylight and I go to bed when it's dark, and I work in-between doing somethin' most of the time.

Lindy: What kinds of things do you find yourself doing during the day?

Clayton: Working on the fields or stonewalls or cuttin' wood. Mowing fields. Yeah, I do some metalworking too.

Liz: What have you had for livestock on the farm over the years?

Clayton: Just mostly cattle. When I came back, I had bought a cow from Earl Chandler. He had a cow that had a calf and the calf died. So, what they did was they got a female cow from Willard Huntoon, so it could nurse on the mother so that the calf didn't die. So, then I ended up, you know, having both of those. And then I ended up buying a Hereford cow, and then I got a preference for Herefords mostly. So, what I had mostly were Hereford. They ended up being pets for my neighbor. Finally, two years ago, the last two that we had, they had issues, so we had to put them down.

But I figure there's no money in farming, period. There's a lot of work, and it costs you more than it's (laughs)... kinda like you say: it's like a boat – a boat is a hole in the water you dump money into. Well, the farm is a hole in the ground you dump money into.

I don't know of anybody that's really farming that makes much money. Other than probably Don Lucas, he does a lot of haying, and he's got all the equipment and stuff. But Timmy Martin, he's the road agent here, he works down at the town sheds, you know, to be able to keep farming. The money he makes from that job, he dumps into the farm, just to keep going.

Liz: So, farming is a labor of love I guess?

Clayton: Yes, it surely has to be. My philosophy is, I tell everybody that work never killed anybody. Inactivity does.

Liz: And you've got a lot of years behind you to prove that! You put your farm into a conservation easement. How did you go about doing that?

Clayton: I contacted Ausbon Sargent and they come up and look at stuff, and then they survey it and everything else. Then you get an easement that it cannot be built on; it cannot be subdivided, forever. Hopefully. And a lot of other people have done it in town. I'm trying to get some people up there to do the same thing I did.

Liz: That's really looking forward to future generations and to kind of maintain the atmosphere and the environment of the Town of Wilmot, isn't it?

Clayton: Yup.

Lindy: We do want to thank you very much for being a part of this project.

Clayton: My pleasure.

Lindy: You've led an exciting life, mostly outdoors.

Clayton: Yup.

End