

**CONNECTICUT 20TH CENTURY AGRICULTURAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL IDSTORIES**

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Name of Person Interviewed: Susan Averill (B)
Sam Averill (A)

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Interviewee Address:

LL: Thank you very, very much for agreeing to do this. I know this is a busy time and this is one of the few I've done at 7:30 at night but I have done some very early in the morning. Would you talk about please...I should talk for the tape is that you are the son of Jean Averell whom I have interviewed.

A: Yes.

LL: And the nephew of Hy Averill, Hyman Averill.

A: Right.

LL: And so this is a Bicentennial farm and the generations are carrying on at this point. So would you talk about when you were born and you were born on this farm?

A: Yes. I was born in 1946 in New Milford and have lived here and down the road in the same house where my mother is living right now. I lived here for four years At the time my grandfather died and my grandmother moved down there and our family moved up here.

LL: All right. So the big house and the little house changes?

A: Yeah, yeah.

LL: Who is managing the farm?

And so he decided to get out of the dairy end of it and just continue with the orchard. And it was probably at a time when a lot of of dairy farmers stopped and he just, you know, just continued more heavily into the orchard.

LL: Now so, when you grew up and you...you all worked here on the farm and then you went off to school someplace?

A: Yes, I first went to a technical school. Then after two years I moved down to Baltimore. I worked for a couple of years before I decided to go off to school and get my degree in electrical engineering. And so I did that at the University of Arizona and came back and worked in Baltimore for two or three years when I decided I didn't want to sit behind a desk at all.

LL: Interesting.

A: So there was a short stint of a year or two in West Virginia before I came back to the farm.

LL: What did you do in West Virginia?

A: Well, it was sort of my state of dreaming, I would think. You know, I bought a piece of property with a friend and then we thought we were gonna sort of live off the land In that part of West Virginia which was quite hilly, more so than here, well it just didn't work out. I ended up just coming back, coming back to the farm.

LL: But you did like the rural life at that time?

A: Yes.

LL: You had decided.

A: Yeah, I didn't want to live in a city and I haven't since. And, you know, I came back and my parents were glad that I did, showed more interest in being here and working the farm and...and I've been here ever since.

LL: Now, where did you meet your wife?

A: I met her, here, when I came back. She had come back to help take care of her grandmother.

LL: So she was from this area also?

A: Not originally. Originally from New Jersey and her grandparents lived in a place on the other side of Lake Wauramaug. Right in, actually, is that Warren or I guess it's the town of Warren.

A: Well, Warren is pro more my age. But the other fellow, Roger, is...is you know, probably in his early seventies that continues to help us.

LL: What were your neighbors like?

A: when I was growing up?

LL: Yeah.

A: Well...

LL: Like did you have school friends? Were you in...you went to school...

A: There wasn't too many close school friends that were my age. But well, what I see right now is a lot more neighbors, than back then, of course. There are just more buildings around. More developments and you know, and a lot more change of hands. You know, houses being built and sold. You know, someone else buys. They come back, remodel, other people live there. There's a lot more changes in the neighborhood.

LL: How many farms have turned into lots, houses and so on? I mean, have these houses come as a result of farms leaving?

A: Yes, I think so. Some of them. I do, as far as number of farms and stuff, I do recall my dad always talking about how back in the '50's there were probably thirty dairy farms in this town and now I believe, there's only one that's actually a dairy farm.

LL: And that's one of them that's you...

A: Potter's over in the other side of town. And Whitehead's just in the last couple of years is also in town. I think they have young stock. They don't do any milking anymore.

LL: They breed. Is that what they do?

A: Yeah I think so. Yep...yep. And they were one of the farmers that leases a large field from us for...to do haying.

LL: All right.

A: And they're...they're just two miles down the road.

LL: So let's go back then to your nei...well, let's go...let's stay on school for a while. You went to school in Washington?

LL: And you'd have to go and pick it up there?

A: Yeah. Yeah. And we've done other you know, materials from the local Washington Supply Company which does now more hardware stuff and lumber and things like that.

LL: The towns are changing too... Do you have...now how has the actual orchard business changed? How long...you've been back for how many years?

A: Since about 1978.

LL: Okay, all right. So how has it changed?

A: Well, even before I came back, my parents started to get more and more into having pick-your-own, on the farm. And it's...it's increased a lot even since then. As when I was growing up and when I was younger, I remember that apples were picked and stored and there was very little retail selling or pick-your-own selling. Very little.

LL:
sold to stores?

So they were stored and then

A: Yeah, earlier...even in the middle '50's...before the middle '50' s, very much went to Avalon Farms which was a fairly big orchard right up the road in Bantam. And...or Litchfield. And they had migrant pickers that came down and picked and brought all the fruit up there, or lots of the fruit. We had virtually no storage and then in the middle '50's we went in cooperation with Hallock Orchards and one other Terek Orchards over here on the next road over. And altogether they had this large storage down at Hallock's where we stored apples. And it was full. I think mainly by Mr. Hallock and we all stored apples down there and paid Mr. Hallock.

LL: And then where did these apples go when they left there?

A: And then they would mostly go to wholesale if we were lucky, to another wholesale distributor. Some to Avalon Farms, some had gone to Bluejay Orchards. They are the two main ones that I remember.

LL: You didn't deal directly with stores?

A: Very, very little. A little occasionally but mainly it was large...or other large orchards.

LL: Then now...so then you went into pick-your-own. Gradually?

A: Yeah, it was gradually going into pick-your-own more and more and more. And I guess Mr. Hallock might have...well, that orchard...it was probably about 1980 or so that Mr. Hallock died. I believe it was then.

LL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So when is your actual season for your apples?

A: Our apple season starts usually the mid July with the very early apples. And we sell those informally right out here in front of the house. And then usually Labor Day Weekend,... we start the Bartlett and then a week later the MacIntosh and that's when we open up our stand up in the orchard and then it's open to the public. And then various apples after the MacIntosh can be picked right up through now. This is towards you know, the mid to late October we often have apples for picking, the later varieties.

LL: How did the drought affect you this year?

A: We thought it was going to cause a lot of small apples. As it turned out some are small, a lot grew amazingly well, despite the drought and as far as the number of fruit, they were coming anyway despite the drought because they were set back in May and June and we knew they were coming. Just a matter of how well we would get them and what size they would be at the end of the season.

LL: We were starting to talk about how had things changed since you came and things that you may have...be doing differently now than when you first came back or how you managed the orchard?

A: Yeah, the major way is that...that the pick-your-own has increased so much and...and that since my dad died, we have the stand being built and a second small cold storage there and my wife Susan, buying lots of things, various things at the stand for selling including having pumpkins there and small amounts of squash and gourds and apple stuff. Like, you know, pie...apple cutters and...

LL: Do you bake those pies?

B: I don't have time to bake but Sam's sister makes pies for us fairly regularly and they sell very well. We have honey from a beekeeper who hives on the property. We sell honey at the stand.

A: Local maple syrup.

B: Sam's mother and I make a lot of jam and jelly that we sell at the stand. Now that we have a covered building we're able to do that. Before we were kind of working out of the back of the car or a little rolling wagon.

LL: Okay.

B: And we really couldn't offer anything else so we have added some things and it's definitely increased the business.

B: Northeast Fruit Growers is it?

A: That's yeah. But the University of Connecticut puts out a bulletin, a weekly bulletin that's important. It actually...has been watered down in the last few years. There's not as much valuable information as...as what we used to get. We used to get weekly updates on you know, for certain insects when there can be a problem but now it's much more general if at all...if we get any information at all. Although there is a phone line that we can call with a recorded message which I probably don't take advantage of and that would probably help.

LL: So you could call in with a question and they'd get back to you?

A: Actually, it's a...I don't think I've used it that of...at all this year but in the last two or three years I'd call and they would change the message either once a week or once every other week and it would be just timely information about what's going on about what's growing and what insects might be a problem. And if there's special disease problems or..

LL: Interesting.

A: Lorraine...Lorraine loves this---

LL: Oh yes...yes...okay.

A: And...and we missed in the newsletter, Dave Kolas used to have a lot of information. But since he's retired, I'm not sure if Lorraine does all of that or if there's someone else now.

LL: I don't know that but I'll find out.

B: I think there's a website too.

LL: I was just going to ask that. Do you...and do you use the computer?

B: There is but we don't take time to use it.

LL: I've just gotten a web...I mean, I've just gotten a computer at home that can get me on and my son is...is...

(Tape interruption.)

B: And you can read it while you're having your breakfast which you can't do with the...with the web. So we really don't take advantage of that.

A: Would you like a...a...some cider?

LL: I sure would, thank you.

A little encyclopedia; I looked up New England agriculture and under Connecticut agriculture I couldn't find it there. But New England agriculture, it said, Because of soil conditions there is no appreciable agricultural economy in the New England States.

A: Interesting.

LL: Can you imagine this?

B: Interesting.

LL: And so part of this is I think, is going to be some kind of a...of a book? I'm not sure what at all I'm going to do because I...I just...people don't have the information to know that all this is out here. They just think about it differently. See that's part of my...it wasn't my quest but as I've gotten into it more, I just realize how little people knew. So anyway...what town connections...now you're...l...your mother talked about what she had been working on. Have you done anything related to any of the boards and committees or gotten involved in the town in any way?

A: Not directly. We have had interactions because of what...some of the things that we try to do. Especially a year or two ago, a friend of ours wanted to put some of his sculptures in one of our fields and we said, "Sure, go ahead." Well, we got in trouble with the zoning board and the zoning board said, "You've got to remove the sculptures." So that's what he's in the processing of doing right now.

LL: Because you're zoned as a farm?

A: Because yeah, we...we...they've...yeah, we're zoned residential and farming. And we're not zoned commercially which is the way they would want it. And they felt that the sculpture field, these sculptures out in the field was more of a business and that the sculpture was going to be making money on it, the artist. And so they said, "You've got to remove the sculptures."

LL: How big were they?

A: Some were..as bigger than the house, I mean tall. You know, some were thirty, forty feet high. Fifty, maybe even fifty or sixty.

B: But we were still getting hay from the fields.

LL: Yo.

A: Yeah, the hay was field...

LL: Yeah, unless... some of your issues become their issues. That might be something. You talked about insurance. Is there a big difference since you have a pick-your-own as to the kind of insurance you have to have?

B: You need to have, you know, substantial liability coverage because you have the public coming onto your property but it's...it's not year round. It's only part of the year so it could be lot higher if it were a year round operation, people coming all the time. Or if we had hay rides, which we don't do, partially because of insurance.

LL: Oh, I see.

B: That would make it go way up. Yeah. It's something to think about though in a lawsuit crazy country that we're in. I don't think farmers used to have to think about that at all.

(Tape interruption.)

Step in a woodchuck hole and they'd sue you and yet you wonder...we did have one customer this year who said that, you know, we should be warning people that there's poison ivy out there. And you know, to us it's kind of...you're out in the country and there's poison ivy on every stone wall and it's...it's one hazard that you know, we're not going to go spraying every piece of poison ivy and it's something that you...

A: Teach your kids...

B: ...to watch out for when you're taking a walk in the woods or in the country. And meanwhile she was picking an apple that was roped off that we hadn't directed her to We had a sign saying Please pick only where directed. So she was already ignoring one of our signs. Having a sign there about poison ivy obviously wouldn't have helped in that case.

LL: This is true. Now this was an adult or a child?

B: An adult. But she was upset because there was poison ivy in there. And it makes you shudder, makes you think. And yet we need the customers to come and pick the apples because paying for labor to pick the apples and just sell at a shop you know, would be prohibitive. So we need the customers to come out and make a day of it and have fun and pick those apples.

LL: One couple I've interviewed said that they have...that they sometimes lose patience with their customers and they have hired a couple of people who have more patience than they do to handle their PR. 'Cause every once in a while they get upset with things that happen.

A: Yeah, well...

A: Well, it seems like that but I don't know in a day. I don't know if there's two or three...

B: There's probably like sixty cars at a time and that changes it for a couple of hours so... LL:
So what time are you open, what time?

B: We're open nine to five. And if you have sixty cars there at once, each car could have five people in it.

LL: Yeah.

B: It could be a couple hundred people at a time on the...I would say a thousand in a day. Two thousand in a weekend. It can be fairly crowded but that's for us because we're in the stand where all the people are coming and going. For the people out picking, it's still a very peaceful country experience.

LL: Sure, yeah.

B: So...their perception of it is very different from ours and they're all very thrilled to be...to be here in this pretty spot.

LL: Now, you give them a bag and they fill it? Is that what...

B: Um hmm. Sometimes they fill it, sometimes they overflow it.

LL: It's like picking strawberries right? One for me and one for the basket. That kind of thing. What is your greatest joy out of being here?

B: For me it's setting our own hours. I mean, we...we don't have to work nine to five seven days a week. But we have the option of choosing that. Now, it's also being able to work outdoors in a pretty spot. We like that. And we like seeing the people that are very appreciative of sharing that and it's nice to see. It's a nice way to earn a living.

A: Yeah, it is...it is pretty amazing that we just see...some of the people we see, we only see once in the fall. You know, a lot of people that are just even from town you know, people that may be we went to school with or sometimes even neighbors. We might only see them once or twice and...and often times during apple season.

LL: Like the reunion.

B: Um hmm, it is.

LL: When did you decide to do that?

A: It was a year or two before my father died. And he was involved with it and he...he was all for it and you know, selling the development rights and at the time it seemed like we almost needed it for...to help continue the farm and...

(Tape interruption.)

LL: Let me...I don't want to keep you any...too much longer at all. I'm sorry this is taking...

(Tape interruption.)

Okay, maybe we should put on this, ten hours a day, seven days a week during apple season.

A: Yeah.

LL: Okay, you were talking about spraying and...and you said that you have...you were talking about the equipment originally.

A: Yeah, basically that was too much...pretty much a two person operation with one person in the cage on top of the sprayer and the other just driving the tractor. Now we have, and have had for since probably in the middle '50's or late '50's any orchard blast type sprayer where one person can do the whole spraying in a much quicker time. And probably does a fairly decent job too. Maybe not as detailed...as detailed and as precise as...the old fashioned but it does quite a good job.

LL: And then you were talking about one part of the orchard you now don't spray.

A: Yeah, right now there's...there's a dozen or so trees that I do virtually all organically and have had a lot of trouble with rodents, deer, crows. Just because it is way separated from the rest of the orchard especially during the season...the busy season when in the main orchard we have lots of people to scare away the deer and the crows. But also right in back of the house, we have a small little section, maybe a quarter of an acre that's...that's much lower spray than the...than the main orchard that I call u almost organic. It's...and that's where some of the very old trees are. Very old trees, originally from...they were planted for the...for the farm along with not just apples but there's quince, cherries. There's a couple of peaches, apri...there's some apricots.

LL: Your mother gave me a couple of apricots and I saved the pits. I...I think I'm going to plant them and see if I can get them to grow.

A: Yeah, I don't think it works that way with...with stone fruit. I believe you can probably get wild, get something wild. I don't believe...

LL: Is that what happens?

LL: And blossom time must be beautiful. B: It is.

A: Yeah, it's a...it's kind of a intense time of the year as far as a grower just because so many things are happening then and you're you know, you're just wondering and you know, about how things are going and if you're spraying enough, if you're...if you have coverage during a wet rainy period.

B: If it's going to be frosty when the blossoms are out or rainy and the bees don't want to come out.

LL: Oh, yeah. No blueberries two years ago because there were no bees.

B: Oh.

A: Yeah, even if how cold it's going to be or how wet it's going to be. Whether you're going be able to get out there into the orchard without getting stuck or you know, have a mechanical problem or something.

LL: There's a lot more risk here than in what you were doing?

B: Yeah. Yeah, that was a steady income but it just wasn't as satisfying in that. At one point I realized that I just was you know, inside a building all day sitting behind a desk and it wasn't really what I wanted to do.

LL: Did you think you were going to be in a rural area after you grew up?

B: Not really, not really. I came here temporarily in 1979 to help my grandmother who had some property and she needed a little help taking care of it. I was planning to go back to California.

LL: Oh, you were in California?

B: I was in California, I came here temporarily and I'm still here. Laughter.

LL: In 1979, is that when you came? Did you ever go back to California for a while?

B: Just to visit. I've been back to visit and we've gone together and shown off our kids to our...my friends back there but...

LL: What a surprise.

B: When you own your own farm, you have to be the master of some many things. You have to be able to fix the machinery, not just grow the crops; but grow the crops, sell the crops, fix the machinery to grow the crops, handle employees, be a manager, in our case, get supplies for the stand. So many things...be an expert dealing with the public. It's really a... more complicated than people think.

A: Right on down to having to deal with zoning and paying taxes, and you know....

B: Bookkeeping. Do all that. You can't really hire a bookkeeper with what you make on The farm, you have to do it yourself And, various government statistics, surveys you have to do. It's definitely more than just putting a couple of seeds in the ground and sitting back in a hammock and watching them grow. People ask us, "What do you do in the winter? Do you go to Florida?" We have to laugh. He's out there anytime its over thirty degrees, pruning the trees. And, I'm at the computer, trying to make the books balance...in January, February, March. And then, fixing things that you just put off I'm dealing with piles, there's a box under the table, catalogues and various mail things that don't need immediate attention. It's all encompassing.

LL: It's a lifestyle?

B: It's a complete lifestyle.

LL: It's like, not a Mom and Pop store because its got more involved in the property. It's also entrepreneurial.

B: Yes.

A: Yeah. And, one of the latest, this started a year ago, and we've probably dropped the ball but we're trying to get into the Stewardship Program with the State to possibly have some wildlife management and control. Possibly with, for instance, bird type predators against the mice in the orchard, to help control withhouses and things like that. And, also, in conjunction with that, the Stewardship Program, possibly having a trail going throughout the orchard to just where the orchard and the woods around the property, possibly in conjunction with people coming to the orchard for picking apples, then they can go for a walk. So we were, kind of dropped that for now, but hopefully we can get back to it and maybe have some trails on the farm.

B: There's just so many hours in a day.

(End of Interview)