

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

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Name of Person Interviewed: Meyer Himmelstein, Agricultural Producer
Eva Himmelstein, Interview #1

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I was looking for someone who had sold the development rights to their farm. Another farmer, who had split with his son over this very issue, suggested Eva Loew of Hampton. Never could I have imagined the very special story of her life that she would tell. Her recollections of an historical time, and day-to-day living, create pictures of time and place, and history beside the most recent selling of the development rights to her farm.

I was greeted at the door by Eva and her large, very large, gray Great Dane.. Somewhat shorter than average, she had a special confidence about her. I had called ahead to arrange this meeting. I again explained my project about 20th Century Connecticut Agriculture and the questions I would like to ask. She was ready!

She started with her birth in Berlin , Germany. That, of course, opened the door to "How did you happen to come to Connecticut?" Smiling she said, "Do you want to hear it?" I had two tapes for my recorder. And so she began.

Saying that she had a normal upbringing, she spoke of her physician father, and mother, who had studied nursing. "One way to get rid of female medical students is to marry them," he laughingly had said. Her mother helped in his practice, carried out from their home , then a common practice. She mentioned domestic help and I saw a picture of a comfortable brick house displayed on a nearby bookshelf.

In 1935 she and her sister were told that Jews could no longer go to the high school. She was sent to England to finish her studies and returned to Berlin. She had belonged to a Jewish youth group, at that time the only way young people could socialize, and began her interest in agriculture. "Actually, my interest started with our big garden." She recalled, smiling. " One year I grew radishes and tried to sell

them to our cook for five cents apiece." When the changing conditions in Germany made it increasingly apparent that she could not become a doctor, she joined others to attend an agricultural training school in Silesia, now a city in Poland. There, with the other girls "I learned skills; to clean house, launder, darn socks, milk cows, take care of chickens, and bake in outside ovens."

Eva's father had been a respected doctor in charge of a military hospital during the First World War. She related that in the 1930's, when the anti-Jewish programs began, a German military friend forewarned him about the family's safety. In August, 1938, her father lost his license to practice medicine and new decisions were made. Eva said that it was her mother who decided it was time to leave Germany.

"One morning, me and my sisters went-off to school wearing layers of clothing, carrying whatever we could conceal in our school packs. My parents also went off, on their regular routines. We told no one, especially our household help. We never returned, and that began our flight."

Eva and her younger sister were sent to Switzerland to stay with friends, the only country they could get into at that time. Her older sister and younger brother had been in England for some time. Her parents went to England and on to the United States. There, they were required to leave and "come back legally." Cuba allowed them to enter, and the girls received a cable to go to Cuba, also. The two girls flew from Zurich to London, not able to go through Germany, and unable to get a transit visa through France. A boat in England was to take them to Cuba but they arrived too late. Chamberlain was in Munich. Eva remembers, " We were just in time to hear him say the in famous words, " Peace in our time."" She remembers that people in London were already walking around with gas masks worn on their arms and they were sandbagging buildings, preparing for war. The two girls joined the rush of people lined up at the American Consulate. Many English people were there trying to get their children out, and to the US.

" Finally, after days waiting in line, my sister and I were given transit visas. A letter of support had been written on our behalf by the father of a man married to a daughter of one of my mother's very good friends. I am sure that this letter from Sigmund Freud did it."

Finally, the two girls took a boat to the United States. Eva remembers that they traveled through the end of the hurricane of 1938 while on the high seas. Friends met the ship and the girls stayed with them in Hoboken, New Jersey. They finally got a visa for Cuba, and in the allotted four days, took a banana boat to Havana. They were there with their parents for six months. Her mother was finally able to immigrate to the US, but returned immediately to Cuba to take the girls, who were minors, back to the US on a " preference quota."

While her sister stayed with her mother to finish high school, Eva went to a farm in Virginia. The owner, a philanthropist from Richmond, had placed the names of the Jewish refugees who had attended the farm school on the deed to the farm. This made immigration easier, " as a land owner," and many of those students were reunited at the farm in Virginia.

" I was in charge of the dairy which consisted originally of two cows. Eventually we had eight cows and one bull. My future husband was there, also. He was in charge of all of the horses. When war broke out, all the boys on this farm, and there were by that time thirty of them, went into the service." Eva later spoke of these men, " Because they were bilingual, many were placed in US Army intelligence positions."

The Quakers played important parts in Eva's life. Some Quakers had been patients of her father in Germany. They had immigrated to the United States. Because the town in which he had been born became part of Poland after World War I, obtaining a visa for him had to be done under the Polish quota. In those years, this had become a complex and timely process. By documenting that he had been a

"teacher," teaching Red Cross nurses' classes , they helped him get a " non-quota visa." He was finally able to enter the US and went to Plain field, Vermont where he was a doctor in a Quaker work-study camp at what is now, Goddard College. There he started to learn English, eventually prepared for the American State Boards and practiced medicine again. (Speaking with Eva several months after our first interview, she had recently returned from a reunion of the refugees from the Virginia farm. There are only a few remaining , and Eva quietly told me, "Of all of those from the agriculture school in Poland , only my entire family got out.)

Her own life on the Virginia farm changed one summer when the Quakers helped her get a position in an orphanage as a housemother 's assistant. She then went to Detroit as a maid for two psychoanalysts who had lived in Vienna. She stayed there, helping with their children, attended Wayne State College, and completed her nursing degree after three years. " It was by then , 1945 and my future husband was coming back from Germany. "

Within weeks after graduating as a Registered Nurse , Eva was in New York working twelve-hour shifts in a maternity hospital. She married shortly after her future husband returned from overseas. Her parents gave them a small second-hand car and they went looking at farms. Her husband 's Uncle Alfred Mayer had a farm and boarding house in Franklin , CT so that was where they started their quest and began to farm.

" We started with twelve cows on Wawecus Hill in Norwichtown. We shipped milk in cans. That was the way it was done. Everyday, we took the cans down the hill in our pick-up truck, to go be picked up to go to Beebe's Dairy."

" And of course, all the work was done with horses. All the fieldwork was done with horses. I hated the big white horse because he was mean , but the others were nice. I had to lead the horse for planting corn , making sure the rows were straight and then , actually with the birth of our first child which was two years later, we finally he bought a tractor. Those two things came together. That was in 1948. During those winters I worked weekends at Backus Hospital in Norwich on the maternity ward."

Eva recalls that the original farm was about seventy acres with a lot of woods. They planted enough corn to feed the twelve cows, corn and hay. And, " I canned. We had a big garden. We bought a freezer, which by the way is still out there at sixty-years-old!"

In time, Eva and her husband had six children , a boy followed by five girls. Eva explained that they came in two 's . When the first two were ready for school, they had two more , and the same thing, once again. "The older ones were always able to take care of the younger ones while we were in the barn, here."

They had come to the farm in Hampton in 1950 and began with twenty-six cows. "There was no way of expanding the other farm. It wasn't big enough, and it wasn't really city and it wasn't really country. And, I didn't think the schools would be adequate for our children. We found this farm and I've been here ever since. "

The farm where we were at began with one-hundred-sixty acres, "more or less , as the deed states." She explained that it hadn't been worked very much , and they began with about sixty open acres. The former owners had been there about five years. With a wife from Arizona who didn't want to spend another winter in Connecticut , the man was anxious to sell. Eva related, " We worked very hard , and closely

with the Extension Service and Soil Conservation Service. We did crop rotation, soil testing, fertilization and other management. I think we tripled the output of most of those fields."

Farmers had seasonal help. "Agricultural students had to have that experience in order to qualify for an agricultural college." Most of the students came from Cornell Agricultural College. "We'd let them know we needed somebody and they'd send somebody. There was one, he was nineteen then, he came for several summers and we stayed in very close contact with him. He's now a grandfather. And his children and grandchildren were here last summer.. "

For many years, it was only us and our children. They grew up learning to drive tractors , pick stones, drive trucks, milk cows, chase cows, pull calves. You name it."

"We always had cats to drink the extra milk and chase rats and mice. And we always had horses, one of two for our pleasure, not for working. One summer we raised broilers in an old chicken house. We raised five hundred broilers and sold them. But then it got too much. We figured our main income was from milk so that's where our energies went. That's why a lot our big farm work, like the baling of hay and the harvesting of silage com, we put out on custom work."

I asked about "custom work," and Eva explained . "Somebody comes in... We cut the hay, redding and raking , and then someone came in to bale it. Same with the com. We had somebody plant it and we cultivated it. Then, for cutting, we again hired somebody , an outfit that came with their trucks and their chopper. For the five or six days it took to harvest i t, we felt it wasn't worth the investment in that kind of machinery and its upkeep."

Sometimes it was the neighbors who invested in equipment and then contracted out. It was these same neighbors that Eva spoke about. "It was hard to get to know them, but after a while very often we worked together on something. When we first came here one neighbor came and said he had been in the service, also, and he said that another neighbor had said that we were OP's, "displaced persons," which was sort of a derogatory term. But, with us buying this farm , the neighbor said to them "" He couldn't have been a DP because he (Eva' s husband) was a Captain in the American Anny."" He went on active training every summer. He was Military Intelligence and so most of the summers the children and I ran the farm." Here, Eva motioned to turn the recorder off.

When we resumed, Eva spoke of other memories. " Well, we had a big fire. We had what you would call a conventional barn with stanch ion s. One night in June of 1959 the barn burned down. We never found out what caused it. We were luck y the herd was outside already for the night, but we lost two calves. At the time, what saved the house, it was terribly hot, was those two big maples that we have out there. They were all scorched on the barn side, across the driveway, there. It was a horrible sight."

Eva continues, " Everybody was asleep and I was waiting for the 11:00 o' clock news and all of a sudden I heard the dogs barking and I looked out the windows and the far. .. on the far end of the barn the flames were shooting through the roof already. I called the Fire Department and they made me spell my name three times. Then I think we had six or eight different departments here, Hampton and Chaplin and Ashford and Brooklyn came up... came up the hill , and they pumped out of our pond and the neighbor' s pond. They were relaying the tankers but once a barn goes up, especially with hay up above the barn, there was... you couldn't do anything. That's all. ..and we rebuilt it as loose housing."

Eva indicated her barn, outside, "You can still see it, the barn, hay barn and a milking parlor, a double-five mil kin g parlor. That was a big change. The cows came to you in the parlor to be milked. I hated i t

at first. It was hard to get the cows used to it, to come in that way. We had to beat them and pull them but it worked after a while. They (Hood Company engineer) wanted to put in a double-six, a herringbone type, which was regular. I told them I would be milking alone sometimes, could they do a double-five. They did and I felt that I could handle it. We were in the parlor by September."

A new contract had been written with Hood. As with other changes in farming, these contracts changed, company ownership changed, and the manner of processing changed. Eva recalled, "When we started, here... I think we already... we made a contract with Hood. I'm pretty sure. And then it became...oh God what was it that called ... not Dairyman's League... that coop... Agrimark. It became Agrimark ... that's how our milk was sold. There weren't many farms left here, but I know our neighbors sold to Agrimark."

Connecticut's dairy industry diminished greatly in the 1900's, through land development, competition from other parts of the country, and government policies. I asked how many farms were still farming as dairy farms. Eva thought, "As dairy farms? One. And those... those other people that farm all my open land. [They live} half a mile up the road he has other land that he rents."

"They have now at least maybe a hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty cows. Yeah... you have to get larger. When we.....we started out with twenty-six cows and when I sold, we had eighty. When we built the loose housing barn, we built with eighty free stalls to make sure that we had enough space."

Other changes had taken place in the processing, collecting and distributing of milk. Eva explained, "We had a cooler in Norwich when we took our milk to Beebe's. You know, with cold water in and the cans in there. A truck came every other day to pick them up. Then we had to put in a bulk tank because we wanted the milk in bulk. The milk was pumped out of that every other day. Refrigerated trucks must have been in the middle 60's."

Dairy farming requires total commitment, no days off. Eva, "Oh, we never got away. We never went away. My husband got away every summer on active duty. It was a big thing when once-in-a-while we took the day and went to Misquamicut to the beach, or something like that but I never had a... not. never had a vacation until I sold the cows."

Eva related, "I gave up the dairy herd in 1981 or 82. My husband was gone and my son had married. I couldn't go on by myself. So, I sold the cows and machinery to someone whose young son was taking it over. (And he rented the farm.) Of course, he didn't want to take any advice. I told him which cows were bred and you know... After two years they sold the herd. He felt he couldn't go on; it wasn't profitable. Production went down and all sorts of things happened, so they decided to make a clean break. They didn't tell me they were selling the herd. One night I heard a lot of commotion and I looked out and there were trucks pulled up to the barn and they were loading up the cows. You know, when you home-raise them and of course all the cows have names. We knew all the cows and what they did and didn't do well and which ones kicked and which ones didn't kick. So that was quite a shock." Later Eva heard through the local grapevine that the new owner had said that it was the best herd he ever bought. Eva is proud, " ... we had a good herd average. We had good cows."

Eva and her husband sold their original bull, and in 1946 began using artificial insemination to build their herd. It was quite new. As Eva said, "Having only one bull you have all of your eggs in one basket...,, and a bull, in the first place, it's not safe. I used to have to hold the bull's ears while the Vet did blood testing for TB! Where artificial insemination you had a variety of bulls that you could choose to breed with certain cows for production or for conformation of body or the other things that go with it. I remember some neighboring farmers coming around to see if the calves looked any different....The bulls were all registered bulls and our cows were not registered. But you know, by the

time we got through raising the calves of those I figured we were 99.6% registered. But we never had registered animals. We were interested in production."

" We had a herd average of about sixteen/eighteen thousand pounds per cow which was good. It could be something like two thousand pounds every other day, but I can't remember. I do remember when we first hit that ten thousand pound barrier. We thought we were doing very well, but then we bred more and more for productions and you fed for production."

Eva returned to thoughts about leisure. "There really was no leisure. I got involved in... in the Board of Education right away because I figured when my children started school this is the only way I would find out what was going on in the schools. I think the first time I ran for the School Board was in 1955 when my children were starting to go to school , the first two. Then we decided to build a regional high school and I was on the Building Committee and then on the Board of Education for that. So, I put in a total of thirty years on the Board of Education serving the town. I was instrumental in helping a Public Heal the nursing Agency going for Hampton, Chaplin and Scotland which worked very well for quite a few years and then for some reason was absorbed by other agencies. And, my husband was very active in many agricultural things, Soil Conservation, DHA (Dairy Improvement Association), and of course, he had his regular duty with the Anny. Yes, in fact, my husband was on the legislative committee for the Farm Bureau."

[Capping her community participation , for thirty years Eva served as a volunteer Registered Nurse for the Red Cross Blood Service, and also served as a volunteer with the local ambulance for ten years after completing an EMT course in 1976.)

"The children were in 4H, and we had a horse. " Eva had spoken of having one or two horses , for pleasure, at their second farm. And her husband was a horseman. His family had a brewing factory near Mainz, Germany. He had worked there , with their horses , that pulled their wagons. Eva recalls , " ... He loved horses and he loved riding. All our kids learned to ride horses bareback. He wouldn't let them put a saddle on until they know how to sit on a horse bareback." There was a 4H group in Hampton and her oldest daughter was especially very active. The children went to the 4-1-1 camp, and they were also in Girl Scouts.

Sometimes people speak of differences in children living in town or on farms. Eva was thoughtful. " I think in many ways it was because they had their chores to do. They had certain things and that they were expected to do. Like in the mornings. One of the children always got the cows in the summer. And, they had to go down in the pasture and round ... round up the cows, usually with one of the dogs before they went to school. And when my son joined the Navy, one of the girls was always there to help me milk in the mornings. Then they took a shower and went to school. And , they had to be .. one of them always had to be here for the afternoon milking. I told them that as long as one of them was always here l.. they could do all the extra-curricular things in school they wanted to and they were all on sports teams and they all played in the band so they... I don't think they missed out on the extra-curricular things. "

" But I think it made a lot to do with bringing them up as very responsible people. But they knew that they had to... that certain things they had to do. . . we could send one out in the middle of the night and say, " Check that cow and see if she started to calf," and they would come back and say, "Ye ah, the water bag is hanging out." So , we' d get out there and sometimes pull the calf or maybe the calf came by itself. But they... they knew these things. "

Though Eva ' s children had worked fanning, and her son, while in the Navy would often arrange his leaves to help with harvesting, none of them remained in farming. "They all didn't finish college but they all went to college. " One went to Springfield College because she like sports, two went to UCO NN, one went to Post Junior College. "She finished her degree at Eastern and got her Mater 's Degree in Math Education and is teaching math now". One daughter has written essays of the joys and beauty of country life, essays about farming, the seasons, her family and her mother.

There are other aspects of farming that cannot be ignored. These community spokes that have so much to do with a fanner's success and daily business dealings. I asked Eva where they had purchased needed supplies.

" Well, the home supplies were minimal because we raise d most of our own food. I never had to buy fresh fruits or vegetables or canned goods because we raised ... we always had a big garden; raised lots of vegetables." We had our own milk. We bought the eggs from , a poultry farm and we bought our... we tried raising our own beef but it didn't work ... We were... you get too attached to the animals. The kids got too attached so we bought our beef wholesale at Manchester Packing and they wrapped and froze it for us and we just brought it home. Our grain came from Agway for a while, which was originally Eastern States. Then we got some grain from Blue Seal and at the end all our grain came from .. guess it ' s the Manchester Coop. And our fertilizer we bought from fertilizer companies, Agrico and Old Fox."

Eva continued about the fertilizer, " The fertilizer was brought and spread. They came and spread it. Yes, that was part of the deal! They came with their big trucks and the fertilizer was spread. The same with when the soil test indicated that.. . that we needed lime. We got the lime and it was spread."

Banking and insurance are other aspects of farming as a business. Eva remembered, "We had Farm Bureau Insurance, which I still carry for the farm and everything else, here. And we banked with what was then CBT and is now Fleet Bank and heaven knows what it will be tomorrow. We... we did business with Production Credit and the Land Bank, originally. We had our long-term mortgage and our short term loans with those two companies. Production Credit PCA it' s called. Federal Land Bank. You know , once we got the mortgage paid off we didn't have to worry about that anymore. We took just short-term loans out sometimes for, if we wanted to buy a tractor or extra fertilizer and they got paid off."

Eva remembers that in the 1940's a tractor might have cost about two or three thousand dollars. She recalls that they then went into diesel tractors , and the new milking parlor with direct pipelines leading to the bulk tanks. She also thinks about the differences between American farming and what was done in Europe."... in Europe the farming is very intensive because land is at a premium. Like they, in those days at least, they had instead of orchards they ' d have the roads lined with apple trees and every inch of ground was cultivated."

And then, we speak of Connecticut's land ... and soil. Eva knows, " the only class, what they call class A or class One soil is really is in [the] Connecticut River Valley where they used to have all the tobacco fields and truck gardens and truck fields. Here (Hampton , Connecticut) it depends how you work it. We, working with the Soil Conservation people, we had some of our cornfields in contours. We had strips of com and then strips of hay in-between so there wouldn't be any erosion because there is no such thing as a level field in this part of the state."

As Eva and I spoke about how farming had changed , the reality of the weather and the world of business converged. First there were the floods of 1955; then the drought of 1957. Eva recalled the drought. " things just dried up and the com didn't grow and the alfalfa was about twelve inches

when it blossomed and then you have to cut it because otherwise it won't start over again. Yeah, and there... there was a program. We got a drought loan. A loan, I think it was at one percent interest or something like that and that helped a lot."

Farmers listen attentively to weather forecasts. Eva remembers one year when a hurricane was forecast. "All the neighbors got together and we all did everybody's com. With all the trucks and everything that...and we got everything in before the hurricane came... a hurricane can make a mess in the cornfields."

Always with an eye to the weather, farmers continually adjust to changes in the business "climate." Eva recalls, "You had to have more and more cows in order to meet your bills and which means more intensive farming on... on the fields. You had to get more production out of your fields but then of course, you're always worried about the milk price. My husband probably made a good share of the decisions but we talked about them... They were probably economically based more than anything else... The only difference with a regular business and farming business besides market prices and prices for products that you have to buy, you have to worry about the weather. And that can deal you a real slap every once in a while."

I asked Eva what kept her in agriculture, why did she love it so? She recalled the garden in the suburbs of Berlin. "Almost everybody had some gardens. We had fruit trees and raspberry bushes, and then of course, lots of lawn, too, to make it look pretty." Of her parents, her father enjoyed their garden the most. When he retired and moved from New York, he moved to the country, to Hampton, Connecticut.

Eva says, "Growing things and seeing them grow and producing things does a lot of satisfaction. That's why I still have a big garden. I don't really need a great big garden but I plant a big garden and a lot of stuff goes to my children. There is a satisfaction in... in growing things and doing things that are productive. There is something very positive about that."

Eva is leasing some of her pastureland and the barn to a woman who has three adult horses and a filly. Following a first, a second neighbor is sub-dividing. With so much emotion about the love of growing, I returned to my original reason for seeking out Eva Loew. "Tell me," I said, "about selling your development rights."

Eva is thoughtful, "Well, I was faced with either... when my... when I didn't have an income from the farm anymore, I was faced with either selling it and moving someplace else which I couldn't see and they were... this was one option which also made... not only helped me stay here financially but it helped me keep the farm as a farm, 'cause I have worked every inch of this farm and I've planted thousands of trees on this farm, mostly evergreens. All the evergreens you see around here I have planted. I just couldn't see .. I couldn't see myself in the city and since both of my neighbors were going through the same stage in a way, I felt this was a good thing to do because I could stay here and the farm would stay a farm. So it was two-fold, really. With the money that I got from the State, that's invested. With that and social Security, I can stay here and the farm stays a farm. And my children and I enjoy walking through the woods. Yesterday they were here and they were cutting grapevines to make wreaths and although although it's a horrible scourge now, the bittersweet, but it looks pretty and they take that home. And I grow Indian corn and..... They like to go down to the pond, see the fish and now I have some horses here and they like to see the horses."

..It's been a very happy life in many ways. A very satisfying life and it's been a good place to bring up children and if I had to do it over, I'd do as the song says, the same things again. "