

CONNECTICUT 20TH CENTURY AGRICULTURAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORIES

Interviewer: Luane J. Lange

Name of Person Interviewed: Heman Averill

Date of Interview: May 4, 1999

Transcriber: NIM Transcription

Interviewee Address:

Q: This is an interview with Heman Averill who has been in New Preston and was born in New Preston. Thank you very, very much for agreeing to talk to me.

Will you start out by talking about where you were born and what it was like, what you remember as a child on the Averill Farm?

A: The Averill Homestead, in this town of Washington of which New Preston is a village, was purchased by my ancestors from the Indians in 1746. And the two hundred seventy-five to three hundred acres have been in the family ever since. My brother was the eighth generation and his son Sam, who is running the farm, now is the ninth generation. The farm incidentally, has had the development rights purchased by the State of Connecticut just as my...the year my brother died. He had been negotiating with the State and that had come to a conclusion just when he died. So that has since taken place. Of the two hundred and ninety acres, I guess it is, there's different figures but it's roughly two hundred and ninety, the State has acquired the development rights to about two hundred and sixty acres. Until approximately twenty years ago, it was a dairy and fruit farm, milking twenty-five to thirty cows when the dairy was going on. I was the younger son and took care of the ancillary parts of the farming. I kept the woodstove going. My mother refused to have anything but a wood stove even after electricity was brought in. I was responsible for taking care of the chickens and calves and the heifers and the horses. Those were my chores along with helping out with the hay and corn. The job that I hated most was manually picking off the morning glories from the newly growing corn. That was a job that I hated above all others. So I had these chores regularly 'til I left high school to go to college at which time, they got rid of the horses and got a tractor.

But my chores were very important to the farm, I guess. But they were a source of aggravation to me. But I can recall in the depth of the Depression we had food that we had canned and preserved so I did not feel the effects of the Depression as so many did, especially those living in cities. And I've come to appreciate the upbringing that I had; a New England Yankee farm with a New England Yankee family, and the lack of expression of feelings. My brother and father and I would work hours at a time, days at a time I guess, with hardly a grunt between us. But it was...it was good for...I left because it was clear that my brother was going to take over the farm. That was fine with me. I went into the Navy and he stayed home to run the farm. I felt that that was certainly a reasonable arrangement because my father could not, at that time, handle it alone.

Q: Which was during the Second World War?

A: Second World War, right. So I went in the Navy. I had gone to college and then into the Navy and came back after the war and finished college and went to graduate school. During which time, the farm became more mechanized. My brother removed some of the stone walls in order to get a bigger sweep from the tractor. 'Tractors by then, plural rather than one. He also added to the orchard which now consists of I guess, around twenty-two hundred fruit trees, primarily apple but a number of pears. The fruit-growing and harvesting was of great interest to my brother. I was surprised when my sister-in-law told me not long ago that my brother missed milking cows long after he got rid of them. I had assumed that that was an albatross around his neck. When people talk about what a great life it is to farm I say, "Yep. My brother went twelve years and four kids before he ever missed a milking," which makes people stop and think and get an idea of just how demanding farm life can be. But, he still missed the milking apparently, missed the cows after they were disposed of. He settled for growing hay and growing and expanding his fruit portion of the farm. Leased a portion of the farm to a neighbor who used to grow and continues to grow peaches on it. So we had peaches, pears and apples. Then, three, four years ago, the State did acquire the development rights for a major portion of the farm, much to the delight of the neighbors and to the delight of my nephew and his wife. They were finally able to get some money to do some things with the old house and the barns. My brother and father weren't able to because there just wasn't enough money for it. But it continues to be a labor of love. My nephew has two children both on the verge of going to college. I do help out in the Fall at harvest time when the pick-your-own fruit is in full swing. And I've gained a greater appreciation of the farm, having come back here after being away for forty years than I did when I was a slave to it's demands. I'm not sure what other items I can provide them that might be of help to them.

Q: When you were doing all that work as a youngster, what were your days like?

A: Chores in the morning, walking...

Q: Like about what time?

A: Well, I did get up six-thirty to seven to make to make the fire in the wood stove in the kitchen so when my mother got up the water would be warm, and being in charge of feeding the chickens and the calves and the horses. Be walking to school and...

Q: How far was that?

A: Well, one and a half miles to elementary school right over here and two and a half miles to the high school where I participated in Winter sports. So, I had to do that walk sometimes twice a day. Buses were not provided yet at that time. I had perfect attendance at that time. If I stayed home I had to do things that I'd much rather less do than going to school.

Q: What were your neighbors like?

A: The nearest neighbor was about a half-mile away. "No children there so I grew up without having any buddies nearby. Although from school you would come up and play baseball in the pasture using you know what for bases. But a fairly lonely upbringing in terms of today's advanced civilization...urbanization.

Q: What's the difference in age between you and your brother? How many years separating you?

A: Approximately eight years and I had two sisters; both older. It was a girl, a boy, a girl, a boy and I was the youngest of the four.

Q: Did your sisters stay in the area also?

A: No. They remained very closely attached to the farm, especially my sister who lived in Norwich until she died a couple of years ago. They both went to college out of State and lived in other parts of the State, not here in town. My brother and his wife had four kids. We thought for some time that none of the three boys of the four was going to take over the farm. The oldest boy who had gone to engineering school finally convinced his father that he did indeed want to run the farm. The other two boys had indicated they had no real interest in it and my brother still didn't believe Sam until he bought a little farm in the backwoods of West Virginia. That convinced my brother that, well, maybe he really did want to be a farmer. So Sam came home and lived nearby as long as my brother was alive. Then when he died, they changed places as my mother had done with Teed and Jean when they were married.

It required a half-way house, a going and coming house. My sister...I mean sister-in-law still lives about halfway up the hill from the farm.

Q: And that's where your mother lived for a while?

A: That's where my mother lived after my father died. ---and Jean took over the homestead.

Q: How many cows did you say you had when you were growing up?

A: Well, we were milking twenty to twenty-five so all told, we were probably forty to fifty young stock and calves, milking cows.

Q: And what did you do with the milk?

A: Early on, I recall using forty-four quart cans, bringing them down to the village right down here with a horse and buggy at a wooden stand where the milk truck would pick them up. Then after I left and mechanization took place, my father and brother got a tank. Had a tank right in the barn and so the milk truck came and emptied the tank.

Q: How did you keep it cold?

A: Prior to the tank, we would get ice in the Winter from Lake Wauramaug and the pond on the farm and put it in the ice house. We also took all the sawdust from the sawing of the wood that we used for the wood stove and through the Summer the ice would be kept in the ice house and put in a tank...

Q: It stayed for most of the Summer?

A: Yeah.

Q: So how big were these chunks of ice?

A: Oh, probably, depending on how cold the Winter was, it could be a foot thick and two and a half feet by four feet. One stack covered with sawdust will last through the Summer. I recall when electricity was brought in, probably...my brother and I used to argue about this...but it was roughly about 1930. I think it was '28, he thinks it was '30 when electricity was finally brought to the farm. Then of course, we had an electric cooler for the milk.

Q: Was the house wired at the same time?

A: Yes, that was done at the same time.

Q: And did electricity come into New Preston and run to the outlying areas?

A: It came up from over there, from Washington, the other side of town. I recall vividly the cold windy month of March, pole by pole coming up the hill toward the house to provide the electricity.

Q: What differences did it make in what was happening at your farm beside the milking?

A: Well, I recall the first radios and listening avidly to the radio. We had all electric lights instead of gas lights or oil lamps that my mother hated.

Q: Did you have extra help during the season?

A: There was generally a person, a hired person, who lived in one end of the house who helped my brother and my father. Then after I became ten or twelve, maybe ten I guess, we handled it alone without that help. But with the advent of the tractors somehow my brother and father were able to handle it themselves. Sam now has a fella who spends about two thirds of his time helping out with various jobs on the farm, primarily in the orchards.

Q: Did the neighbors ever share jobs?

A: We shared corn cutting and siloing with a neighboring farm, a German family by the name of **Keilwasser**. I always enjoyed going down and tending the silo as they were putting in the corn and enjoying the wonderful German meals we would get. If there were some kind of emergency there was always help from the adjoining farms. But corn especially required cooperative ways of harvesting and storing.

Q: What were some of the other neighbors like?

A: Well, I mentioned the Keilwasser's, the German family who were...were not ostracized but discriminated against during World War II; at war with Germany. But there were other farms of Yankees. It just happens that one of the Cherniske farms right up the hill above us right here, they just moved to Utah with their cattle, all their livestock to Utah. As did a family from the other side of town, the Nyes. She went first to Utah and then the Cherniske's just followed them a couple of years ago. So there's really only...there's no real dairy farm left. The Whiteheads...another old family is. They're growing young stock but not doing any milking.

Q: So they're selling stock? Raising it to sell?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And where would they be selling it to? To people going to Utah?

A: As a matter of fact, Mike Cherniske stopped by last Spring. He had moved his herd to Utah; saying that buying stock, it's best to come back East rather than buying it in the Middle West. Some people thought they were better quality and more production from Eastern stock compared to the Midwest. So apparently there's a market for them---

Q: Now you mentioned that during the war... how long had the Cherniske's been here before the war?

A: There were two Cherniske family farms.

Q: I got the wrong one but go on with that. I was thinking of the German farm.

A: Keilwasser.

Q: Keilwasser.

A: The Keilwassers I guess, had only been here one generation. I can't tell you just when but I suppose they were here in the early 1900's. But they were on the farm a little more than two generations.

Q: And it's still being farmed now?

A: It's not being farmed as a farm. It's gone the way of so many that are...well it has been subdivided to a certain respect but the old house and the barns are still being maintained as they were then. It's not been cut up too much.

Q: What do you remember most about your elementary school and high school days?

A: Well, as I say, I loved school a hell of a lot more than I liked the farm, so I did well.

Q: Was it a surprise to your family that you wanted to go to college?

A: No. Both my mother and father had gone to college. They both were quite insistent that we all go and we all did which is a pretty large load for a working farm family to handle. And thankfully for the G.I. Bill of Rights I, of course, came back and went to graduate school which I never would have done without that. But...no, it was understood that we were to do well in our studies to get into college. And all four of us made it.

Q: What did your mother and dad major in?

A: Well, my mother had gone to Syracuse and she majored in Commerce and worked in New York. My father, of course, went to UConn, Connecticut College of Agriculture and majored in Farming and Agriculture.

Q: How did they meet?

A: Well, my mother was taking courses at Storrs. Her father was a minister in Wolcott, Connecticut so after she was in Syracuse she took courses out in Storrs and that's where she met my father. She would come up to visit him on the old railroad, **Shepaug** Railroad, coming up from New York on the train to Washington to visit him when they were "a-courting."

Q: What did you major in in college?

A: Political Science and went to work at the State Capitol in the Budget Office and then put all the State institutions on a forty hour week. They had been on a forty-eight hour week.

Q: What year would that have been?

A: 1952...1951 to 1956. One of the things I did after we got through the conversion of the institutions, I developed the administration management section of the Budget during management analysis of various State governments. And one of the things that I eliminated was the position of Commissioner of Domestic Animals which had been occupied by my grandfather, Heman O. Averill. He had been State Senator and Commissioner of Domestic Animals which is the forerunner of the Department of Agriculture. And then they had become a political appendage with no particular useful purpose. So, I got a kick out of...

(Pause in tape.)

My grandfather Hemen Otis, H.O., was a State Senator from this area for two or three terms and became a Commissioner of Domestic Animals, which is a forerunner of the development of the Department of Agriculture at the State. When I went to work doing administrative management work for Abe Ribicoff and his predecessor, I abolished the position of Commissioner of Domestic Animals that my grandfather had occupied because it had become an unnecessary political appendage. It was just used for political payoff purposes.

Q: In the 1950's?

A: In 1951 or 2. Roughly thereabouts.

Q: Talk about your father's entry into politics. Talk about the makeup of the State at the time, politically.

A: When I was working in the Budget Office for the State, we had four budget examiners for all of the State agencies. The four used to line up to take turns for the single adding machine that was in the Budget Department. Today Budget Management has it's own building but God knows how much...

Q: And computers.

A: Yes, how many computers?

Q: Back when your dad was in politics it was local politics, but your grandfather had been in State systems then?

A: Well, they had both been part of the Republican establishment.

Q: Oh. And at that time the Legislature had a lot of agricultural people.

A: Oh yes. A number of farmers from this area....there were as probably as many farmers as there were lawyers which has changed, obviously, greatly.

Q: So this would be around between 1908 and 1920?

A: Right up to the end of the early '30's. The first third of the century I would say. But it was a State Government whose Legislature met every other year. The role that it occupied in the lives of the people of the State was entirely different. County Government occupied a role which it no longer does. And the functions of Welfare and Health which were not done by it's cities became a State responsibility rather than one hundred and sixty-nine towns. So when the State, and...and rightfully so, took over a number of functions that were duplicated by many towns in the State. Whether or not bureaucracy outran the functions is a matter of opinion.

Q: Do you have any insights or recollections or have you read about how the transition with the changing number of delegates in the Legislature happened to reverse the trend of agriculture in...?

A: The representation from the towns did change in the '40's I would say, reducing the representation of the towns and increasing that of the larger cities where the population centers were.

Q: So it went by population after that time rather than equal---?

A: More so than had been the case before, when it was pretty much equal representation from the hundred and sixty-nine towns regardless of size. So that obviously, helped to change the emphasis of the State's resources going just to agriculture, into the needs of the many growing cities. I later became the Administrative Director of the City of New Haven. So I had some experience, then, managing a moderately, middle sized city and all the germane problems that cities continue to have especially in this State where the resources of the State are not equitably proportioned to the needs of the people in the State. And way out in the country, the suburbs are doing better than the inner cities.

I don't think that we fully acknowledge the problems the cities have even though the cities provide many services and functions serving the richer suburban areas surrounding them. Many neighbors in this small town here, just don't want to acknowledge that the cities are important and have serious problems for which we should all be responsible and cannot just be left to the Detroits and the Clevelands and Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford.

Q: How did you happen to decide to come back?

A: I had worked in State government and local government in New Jersey and then in regional planning for the New York Metropolitan Region and lived in White Plains, New York for twenty-five years. When my aunt, toward the end of her long life here in this house, asked members of my generation if anyone was interested in it, Lucy and I decided that we would, indeed. So we made an arrangement to purchase the house while she was still living in it providing income for her. So it's on that basis that I returned to my town of birth and upbringing. Some interesting results. You know, many things have changed and many things have not changed.

Q: You at least have a different kind of perspective when you've been away and come back.

A: That's right. That's right. So I serve as an alternate in the Town Zoning Board of Appeals. I mean, there's some interesting situations there.

Q: Is that because you're an insider or an outsider?

A: It depends on who you talk to.

Q: Okay. I mean, let's go back to your...to your growing up, again. Do you remember where you bought your supplies when you did?

A: The Washington Supply Company in Washington was started by my grandfather and two or three other farmers to provide them with a cooperative place for purchasing farm materials and supplies and equipment. The Supply Company is still operating today. So for non-food items required on the farm, that came to be the place in which purchases were made. Food which was not produced on the farm and preserved was bought in the village markets on both sides of town, in Preston and Washington and Sears Roebuck. Christmas was Sears and Roebuck time.

Q: Do you remember what it was like before Sears and Roebuck?

A: I don't.

Q: I don't know when Sears Roebuck started. Montgomery Ward, Sears Roebuck was the first catalogue---

A: It was Sears Roebuck that we always patronized. Oh, I can remember when I...I didn't ride on the train until I was a senior in high school. The fourth year Latin class took a trip to New York. That was a big adventure we would ride on the train and I remember when my father took me to Waterbury to buy my first suit just before I went to college.

Q: What did people do in the way of bartering? Was there much of that going on?

A: There was a degree of bartering of farm materials and that continues to some extent. As I said, we were cooperative. We'd work on corn and corn harvesting and storing but we would trade off fruit for somebody who killed a deer. We always had a permit to kill deer on the farm because they would raise hell in the apple orchards. My brother got deer fright when he got a deer in his gunsight. He never could kill a deer. Neither can his son. And, neither would I.  
(Tape interruption.)

Q: Okay, about the deer.

A: Well one reason was that when I was a kid my father ran over a young deer. It was probably three or four days old, with the horse and mowing machine and cut off the hind leg of the deer. We had that deer tethered in the yard all that Summer, feeding him with a milk bottle. It actually died of fright in my mother's arms when the hired man drove a team of horses up to him. Remembering, apparently, the best that we can recall, having been over run with the horses. But from that day on, my sister would never touch venison and my brother couldn't kill a deer. Others do...will take a deer or two and provide Sam and Susan with portions.

Q: Did you have any connection with the Grange or the Farm Bureau?

A: My father was involved with both the Grange and the Farm Bureau and participated as an Officer of the Litchfield County Farm Bureau and local Grange. When I moved back I was invited to join the Grange but I figured that's...that was for the active farmers. Sam...Sam should be the person who would do that and not me. But the Grange and the Farm Bureau were important parts of farming in the early part of the century. No question about it.

Q: Do you remember anything related to any of the finance issues related to farming either insurance or banking?

A: In typical Yankee fashion my father did not really discuss those matters with other members of the family. Certainly after he died, my mother was totally without

knowledge of the intricacies of the financial arrangements between... My father had never actually owned the farm because when his father died, there it was left to my father and five siblings one of whom was institutionalized all of her life. And he really never owned, actually owned outright. So when my brother took over, both my sisters and I deeded over to him our interest in the farm so that he could have really...real management and control of it. But my...I'm sure my father never discussed it very much with my brother and he certainly didn't with his wife, my mother.

Q: And how did she...she then relied on you and your brother?

A: My brother especially.

Q: Especially----- Are there any key changes that you recall happening during your life on the farm?

A: Well bringing the tractor in and replacing the horses. Very big...very big. Prior to that, all the haying was done by hand and my brother could then go to baling and that's a significant difference. There was a lot of time and effort devoted to harvesting hay. It was cut by seventy or eighty per cent I would gather.

Q: So before it was put up in the barn you baled it, you could bale it in the field? (Sure.) Did you every have any connection with 4-H?

A: Yes, I exhibited chickens and my brother exhibited fruit at the 4-H Fairs in the area. I was into 4-H for three or four years and my brother was active, also.

Q: In a Club, a local Club? I was talking to someone this morning about FFA how they teach parliamentary procedure and all these other kinds of things throughout FFA. Did you have any of these kinds of experiences?

A: Not really. No. Oh, it was social but...'cause I was not a very good student of farming and I don't think I looked to that for what others may have looked to it.

Q: Did you ever remember either your father or your brother having anything to do with the Extension System?

A: Yes, yes. Checking diseases of the fruit trees and animals too, farm animals. And I attempted to get some help when I moved back here. But,I got forestalled when I went up to Litchfield to ask about what to do about the blight on hollyhocks and the gal said, "What's a hollyhock?" So I figured the quality of service in the Extension Service had declined significantly since my family had been involved with them.

- Q: What do you think brought you the biggest satisfaction when you were a kid on the farm? Is there anything you enjoyed about being there? Or now as a person coming back? You said you've gotten a different view of it.
- A: Well, I enjoyed the open air and the production of good fruit and I particularly developed an early love for wild flowers and shrubs and used to bring stuff home to my mother for approbation. But, I was really not in love with the farm. No one thinks at that age about what satisfaction one has during the day and to think back and say, "Well, I'm glad that the cows didn't get out of the pasture and run wild in the neighbors' yards anymore." And I guess I could feel a sense of accomplishment after a tough day in the hay field and the hay mow and not be too tired to go down and play ball. Most of my enjoyments are off the farm I must admit.
- Q: You said you played sports. We didn't talk about this. Baseball?
- A: Baseball and basketball. Had some pretty good teams. Got to the State tournaments and so forth. That was a good diversion and my father having been a good athlete, appreciated that and allowed me to do things because of that. Whatever the day's work might be, if I had a ball game...not always but...
- Q: That's what encouraged you to play ball. Do you have...do you have any sense that...that growing up the way you did, had anything to do with how you approached the rest of your life?
- A: Oh, I don't doubt that some of the family values I acquired from both parents, not just the right and wrong but appreciation of some of the finer things in life. Art, music, I acquired from my parents. This was before television, I did a lot of reading. I did my high school oration on Admiral Byrd's exploration of Antarctica. I got the inspiration from all of the books on the exploration of the Arctic and Antarctica I read as a kid. So I was encouraged to do a lot of reading both for its own enjoyment but as a preparation for going to college.
- Q: Talk about the art and music. What...how...in your home.
- A: Well, I can't really say. I got much of that from my sister's husband, my older sister's husband. He got me into jazz. I've enjoyed it all of my life. Neither of my parents were musicians but they appreciated good art if there's such a thing as good art. They appreciated art. (End of tape.)