Q: ...Arnold Hartikka in Voluntown at the Hartikka Family Farm, which is a Christmas tree farm. Thank you for agreeing to do this. Would you start off telling us where you were born?

A: Well, I was born in Virginia, Minnesota in 1923, July 24th.

Q: How did you get from...was your family from Minnesota originally?

A: My family? Yes. We lived in Minnesota until 1928 when my dad wanted to go back to the old country to visit his parents because they were getting on in years. Then of course, we left Minnesota to go to Finland. Then we arrived back into New York City. It was getting fall and my dad figured he could get work easier in a big city than going back to the small town of Minnesota which was heading toward winter. That was the end of going back to Minnesota.

Q: What did he do in Minnesota?

A: He was a carpenter. So he found carpentry work very readily in New York City. Then the crash came, the '29 Crash. He lost his job. He had some savings so he decided to buy a farm so at least he can grow his own food; those days there was no social subsistence of any kind. And so that’s the beginning of the farm here in Voluntown.

Q: How did...how did he find Voluntown in Connecticut? I mean...
A: Well, he first was looking for land in New York State up near Ithaca, Spencer and so on. Then he had a friend that came from his part of Finland and so he decided he was going to come visit him. That was it you see. So, through a friend. Yes.

Q: And was this the original farm where you are right now?

A: Yes. The farm has been added on since those days, but this is. The original homestead is across the street which is still there. It’s a very old colonial which was considered two hundred years old by this Yankee farmer, Vine Barber.

Q: Now when you came here, what kind of farm was it?

A: It was a very run down farm. You’ve got to picture, during the...during the Depression days most of these farms were left pretty much, if not abandoned, at least they were farmed very little. So...so land was relatively cheap. But of course, by those standards it was naturally higher. It wasn’t the buy that you would consider today. But anyway, he did buy the farm. Then of course, land values even went down further from that point. They did hit rock bottom during the mid ‘30’s you see. So that was it.

Q: And what kind of farming did you do when you first came?

A: He started off with poultry. Yes. Had a little livestock but he was more interested in poultry. Poultry was beginning to come about and it was an easier way to make a living. He had enough savings that he was able to carry on and buy feed from a local co-op which those days Agway was Eastern States around here. It was later that Agway and GLF in New York State merged to form Agway. Yes.

Q: Do you have brothers and sisters?

A: I had one sister, yes.

Q: So then as a boy, you helped a lot on the farm?

A: That’s right. Yes, I worked on the farm. When it came time to go to college, I...I applied to Cornell University. I wanted to go there because I was interested in going into the Vet School. Of course, that was then during the Second World War and it was almost impossible to get in because those days there was only eleven accredited vet schools in the country. Cornell was on top of the list and they only accepted about forty one applicants. They had about two thousand applying during the war years.
So of course, naturally they favored students that came off of dairy farms. In those days, New York State was the number one ranking dairy state you see. So...so then I turned an interest to poultry at Cornell.

Q: So did you go to poultry...did you go to Cornell then?
A: Then, yes, yes.

Q: And you specialized in poultry?
A: In poultry yes.

Q: When did you decide you were going to follow on the farm? I mean, you decided you were going to go into agriculture?
A: It was those days when...when I arrived at draft age and I either had to go to service or if the farm was large enough, then you...then they would encourage you to go back to farming you see. The very beginnings of the Second World War they would take all farm boys put them into service. Then they realized that they created a real shortage of food. So...my generation which was just slightly younger, they encouraged them to go back on the farm if they qualified, if the farm was large enough. And that’s the choice I took, you see. Yes.

Q: Okay. Your mother was not used to living on a farm when you first moved here?
A: Well, yes because anybody that comes from Finland in those days would pretty much come off of a farm you see. Yes. So yeah, she was quite familiar with rural living in those days. Yes.

Q: The conditions here, how were they similar or different than what they’d been used to?
A: I can’t say what they...well, I do know that in Finland conditions were terrible because they were under Russian rule. And so it...there was oppression in that...in that sense. And so farming otherwise was similar in Finland as it was in the States at that...it was basically small farming you see. And everything was done the hard way ‘cause my dad had to farm with...with horses. I can remember his buying equipment like mowers and all. They’re all adapted for horses. And so that was a very difficult way of farming. Anything you did, you had to do it the hard way. You had to pitch the hay with a pitchfork. And, of course you had to milk the cows the hard way. Then milking machines later came on the scene. So that was it.
And poultry the same thing was...was done in a primitive way compared to the...the way it's done today you see. Yes.

Q: So eventually then...how many chickens did...do you know how big your poultry farm was?

A: Well, the beginning were smaller, amounted to a few hundred chickens, probably around five hundred chickens and eventually grew to...to a few thousand. And then of course, there was a time when I had expanded and I grew to a point where I had around a hundred thousand chickens. But then I suffered a fire loss because I was operating out of a textile mill nearby. I was one of the larger growers at that time you see. But then that's...that's almost forty years ago.

Q: So you had some poultry here and then you had some off site at this...?

A: Right. Yes.

Q: And you were raising broilers?

A: I was...no, it was eggs.

Q: Oh, eggs. All right, okay.

A: Eggs, yes. Um hmm. I was marketing to stores, to chains and to the government and to the state. Yes.

Q: How far was your shipping area?

A: The shipping area for poultry products is basically within about fifty-mile radius, yes.

Q: Interesting, okay. What was school like back then? And where did you go to school?

A: Well, the original farm was set in the country with all dirt roads. In the spring there was no way we could pass through with an automobile. We had to depend on horse and buggy.

Q: But you did have a car too?

A: So we did have a car...

Q: But not in the spring?

A: I went to school in the little one room schoolhouse which still stands there at the end of Wiley Road which is called the Wiley School.
I went all eight grades there you see. I had the same teacher for all eight...all eight grades. So when you reached the fourth grade, you were teaching the first grade so you can help the teacher. It was more or less like a Old Mother Hubbard situation. She got to know her brood very well. And of course, she took them to heart. It was sometimes hard for her to give grades, anything less than good or excellent. So that was a typical report card I would get you see. Then of course, after grade school then I went to high school in Griswold. That was a new school built by the WPA in those days. I felt that was really huge and being exposed to about three hundred kids. It was a really an eye opener and I really then realized how little I knew and how much I had to learn you see. And but anyway, that was it.

Q: Amazing. So when you went to Griswold, you went by bus?

A: Went by bus, yes, yes. Had to provide for my own transportation to where the bus would pick us up about a mile and a half from the farm. Yes.

Q: Were there many of you who came in from the farmland around here that went into Griswold?

A: Well, there weren’t too many because the population, the rural population was very, very small. So there wasn’t many in my graduating class which was actually a bigger graduating class than some; had about eight students. Some of them went to Griswold and some chose to go to Plainfield. But of course, we did have a Center School which had four rooms in town. They naturally had more graduates because the population then near the village was larger than the rural population.

Q: What were your neighbors like when you were growing up and then when you began...when did you take over the farm from your father?

A: Oh, I took over the farm in 1964, yes.

Q: Had you worked along side him all those years kind of...?

A: Um hmm, yes, yes. My dad had sort of semi-retired prior to that, anyway, yes. Well life was much different. Of course, it was all dirt roads. And of course, there was no such thing as mechanized equipment. In the spring and summer, they couldn’t do very much but use pick and shovel to fill in the ruts. In the spring of course, the leaves and everything would make a perfect combination with water and the mud ...it was tough passing...getting through those roads, you see. Of course, it was the day of the party line. Eventually we got a telephone and I don’t know how many people there were on it. Our ring was, as I remember, was three long and two short. And some had five shorts and some this and that.
And of course, when you pick up the phone, you can always hear all these other people picking up and sometimes to a point where you could hardly hear who’s calling, you know. And so that’s what life was like. Of course, you would make your...produce your own milk and your butter and your cheese and...and all the home cookings. Of course, my mother started off with a wood stove. And you had to fire it based on the wood you had. And you know, you’d try to put less wood on it too and for a lesser fire and of course, you always had to find the right kind of wood for what your bakings were. So it seems that my mother would almost set one day aside every week or every two weeks just for baking. Between baking bread and Finnish coffee cake. So...and actually, I didn’t know what bakery goods were until I started high school. I’d see kids carrying their bakery goods and I’d wonder what they’d taste like.

Q: Was there was quite a Finnish community in this part of the state.

A: Oh, yes. There was a large Finnish community. As a matter of fact, it was mostly the Finnish people who lived in the rural areas. They kind of built up the rural areas. And then of course, they insisted that they wanted better roads. So then my wife had to petition so many petitioners to get the first road in. ‘Cause the early townspeople actually did not want to spend money on the roads for fear of raising taxes. Those were the days when you would dread if you had to pay even a dollar in taxes, you see. And so, although taxes were small by our standards, a dollar was a dollar in those days. Farm labor was basically room and board, you know. And people would come knocking behind the door to work. So it was that sort of a situation you see. And so when my dad told me that he had earned a dollar an hour as a carpenter, I almost flipped when I heard that. And I said, “A dollar an hour.” And it just seemed like such a remarkable wage you know. But that was those days.

Q: So then how did the road...she had to get a petition signed by the people on the road?

A: Had to get the petition signed, so many petitioners. Had to call for a town meeting. Could not get the support of the town. Had to go above the town level to the state level to get help, there. But then once...this...this was the first road that came through, the Wiley Road, in town. Then once that road came through, then there was no stopping it.

Q: Now is that route 49, 165, 138...did that become any of those?

A: Okay. One, 49 had always been. 165 was a dirt road, improved road, was then in the mid ‘30’s you see. So actually we only had one main highway going through town in those days you see. Paved road I should say.
Q: So then, when the petition was signed and went to the State Legislature, did the Farm Bureau or the Grange or someone help with the road situation?

A: Not in that particular case, no. It's just that my mother was determined that we had to have better roads and so she just...she just got the support somehow. She was told that well you...you know, you call the state and whatever and so on. So they...they were instrumental yes, in helping. And they...in other words, they set out a plan, this is what you got to do and so on you see, yes.

Q: And again, what year would that have been approximately?

A: Well, that was in 1936 because the road was paved in '37. Yes.

Q: Do you remember when electricity came along?

A: Yes, electricity came a little bit sooner, yes. And any appliances you wanted in those days you had to buy through the Connecticut Light and Power.

Q: Not in regular stores? Other stores didn’t have them?

A: Well, that's not to say they didn't have them but you didn't have the selection. And basically all rural towns in those days had dirt roads. So, of course, the utilities made it very convenient because they offered the service. Hey, you can buy your appliances from here. And they had a selection and that's what you would do.

Q: And they would deliver them?

A: And they would deliver them, right, yes.

Q: Interesting. Tell us more about your neighbors. How many were there... (Tape interruption.)

...okay. Did they help do things like when you said you had the fire and so on, were there bankers involved or when you did things, did you do things together?

A: Well, yes. If you had a fire in those days, you would....Well, let me backtrack a little bit. Usually, any newcomers coming in to the town, especially in the Finnish community, they would get together and have a house warming. It's a surprise, always a surprise. So that's what happened. So, we had a surprise party. But a so-called "local yokel" spilled the beans so my parents knew that there was going to be a party.
And then of course, if you had a catastrophe or a fire or something, you’d get the support, you see. What little people could give those days. Oh, they would share their food and if they had a few coins or something. They would support and help there and whatever. But anyway, there was moral support and that sort of thing. Yes.

Q: As you were growing up, what did you do? Did you have any leisure time? What did you do for recreation?

A: Well, first of all there wasn’t any...many children around so I mostly played with my sister. We would play games, imaginary games. I guess a game I would like to play would be farm. I called it “farm” you know. Say the pinecones, each pinecone represented a cow and whatever and so on like that. My sister was good natured in that respect so she would do the same ‘cause I would have all the cows and she would have but a handful.

Q: I had a brother like that.

A: And then of course, well we had games. In school, yes, we had Fox and Geese, a game that you have a like a cartwheel.

Q: We played that.

A: Yeah. And so...

Q: You could do it in the snow.

A: Yes, that’s the way we would do it, in the snow.

Q: You’d make the cartwheel and then chase. Play tag basically.

A: Are you taking that Phyllis? (Phone ringing.)
(Tape interruption.)

Q: You were talking about how you spent your leisure time that you had or what you played.

A: Yes.

Q: Yep. Now as you grew up into your teens, how did you meet your wife?

A: Well, I met her at a dance. There was this dance that was very popular...this dance hall that was very popular. I would occasionally frequent there and so...so that’s where I met her.
Q: Where was the dance hall?
A: This is in Rhode Island, yes, yes.

Q: Oh, I see. Had she come from a farm?
A: She...her dad actually owned wheatland, yes. Her dad was from Kansas, Hopper. During the Depression it was...farming was very difficult out there, too, and so he turned to be a steel worker, you see. So he went from job to job and of course, life was very difficult on her side of the family because they could never take many belongings. Work was more important than anything else. So in other words, if a job finished today, in a couple days he had to be somewhere else and that could be maybe hundreds of miles away. And they had to pick up from school and go and move. So sometimes it was that sort of a situation you see. Yes.

Q: So now, how old were you when you took over most of the responsibility for the poultry farm? You may have said that earlier but I don’t remember that.
A: Well, I took over in ‘59 I guess. Yes.

Q: You had many of his chickens...you had a hundred thousand you said at one time.
A: Yeah.

Q: And then you had the fire?
A: Yes.

Q: And is that when you went into Christmas trees?
A: I already was in Christmas trees. I had leased the operation you see. And...

Q: Talk about that.
A: And so, I leased it for ten years and in...

Q: At a different site?
A: Right here. It was right here at the home farm you see. So actually, the beginnings of the Christmas tree farm was right here you see.

Q: Someone leased the land from you.
A: I leased the tree operation to someone else. I started to expand in poultry and I couldn’t carry on both responsibilities. So...

Q: And so then, when did you take on more of the tree farm?

A: Well then, after the fire, it was a matter of going back into poultry. Poultry was beginning to change very rapidly then. It became very automated. I was already partially automated. But then I decided that if there ever was a time to get out, this would be it. Because I would have to start with almost all new beginnings in the poultry. I chose not to go back to poultry. Then I started looking at the Christmas tree industry and then decided to take a stab at it. So...so that’s when I started to...in a bigger way with...with the Christmas trees.

Q: How did you feel when everything burned?

A: Well, it was a devastating feeling. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t even home at the time. I had just arrived to Florida and was going to vacation for about a week or ten days. I got news down there that the fire was going on and there wasn’t anything I could do about it. So then I still spent my vacation there and came back. But as I say, there wasn’t anything to recover, you see. So that’s all right.

Q: So, how did you learn about tree farming?

A: Well, I, actually I was already in tree farming. I had been in it for about three years prior to that. So I...I...well, I guess it was just...let me see. There wasn’t an awful lot to fall back upon. I’m sure it must have been one of the Foresters that told me that this was one way of using your land if you’re not going to produce hay or livestock or anything like that. So then I decided, well, it sounds interesting and then maybe I should consider it. Of course, they didn’t have very good statistics those days. But anyway, anything and everything I read well, it seemed interesting and it seemed that it was worth a gamble you see. So that’s basically it. Yeah.

Q: So then you began planting. And how many acres did you plant into trees? When did it become commercially viable and where did you sell them?

A: Well, of course, the tree industry like many industries you know, the beginnings are always small. So, in other words, you have to be careful that you don’t grow an awful lot and then all of a sudden they come on market and then you find you have no market for it. So anyway, with the Christmas tree industry those days you couldn’t sell the Christmas trees like you could poultry. In other words, eggs there’s always a market for it.
There's always a wholesale market for it. It could be up or down or whatever but as long as you produce that product and met those grades and the quality standards, there was a market for it, you see. Sometimes it's a feast or famine you see. It wasn't that way with the Christmas trees. So if you're a new grower and you come on market with a product...of course, the established buyers would take a long look at you and they would just...if at best, they would probably just buy a few trees. So it's a hard sell in that sense, you see. But anyway that was basically the beginnings of it. Advertising and in the papers to build up both the retail as well as the wholesale market. I tended to probably grow more trees than I felt comfortable about but I figured well, I'll take a chance. But as I say, it started at a time when Christmas trees sold quite well. So...so that was interesting. Yes.

Q: Today we were riding around in the jeep, seeing your operation. Where is your market now for your Christmas trees?

A: Well, the market now is basically between Boston and Baltimore. I would say probably eighty-five per cent of it is between Connecticut and New Jersey you know, which includes New York. Yes.

Q: And these are people who buy them to sell on their own lots? Are they people like Home Depot? I mean, who are your...?

A: No, we don't sell to Home Depot. We basically don't want to put too many of our eggs in one basket. Not any one account takes more than one per cent at best, of our total volume you see. The reason for that is this, if there is a change, losing an account or whatever, then we don't feel the effects of it as bad, you see. So we have not gone after the chains. We sell basically to the nurseries and garden centers who we've been selling repeatedly to for years. We sell to some independents which we have that have been coming also for years and years. And we sell a minimal amount to fire departments and whatever, you see. But we don't sell hardly to fly-by-nights because it doesn't kind of fit into our program. Yes.

Q: Now we saw...we saw all these huge, many, many, many piles of trees and in rows. Like, how much goes out of here in the next three weeks?

A: Well, there's thousands of trees that go out. I can't tell you how much. And of course the bulk of the trees will be moving out within the next two to three weeks at...at best. Yes. Actually, a week and a half to...to three weeks, yes.

Q: And you said you starting cutting about three weeks ago?

A: No, we started cutting about a week and a half ago, yes.
Q: How many people help you in the pruning and the cutting?

A: In the growing season, we have about six people that work for us, yes. Plus my son, yes.

Q: And he’s the one responsible you said, primarily for the...

A: Yes he...yeah, he’s the one that’s responsible, yes.

Q: And do the people who work for you live in the area?

A: No, we use mostly migrant workers which is a program that you have to work with the U.S. Department of Labor as well as the State Department of Labor, and of course, these organizations that provide this help. So we use mostly those. Under that program we had to provide for room and housing.

Q: I see. These people come and stay for a while and then they travel on or they go home?

A: No, they...well, we probably hire them for a longer season than anyone else. Longer than the apple grower, longer than the tobacco grower and longer than the vegetable grower because our season begins in the spring, usually March or early April at the latest you see. And then it goes on right up until Christmas, you see. So we start off with about six and then when it gets to November first and even a little sooner, we have to hire many more.

Q: Now you sell some trees here...cut-your-own. Where do these people come from?

A: They mostly come within the radius of about sixty miles. So pretty much mostly Connecticut and all of Rhode Island, southern Massachusetts.

Q: And you had wreaths out there. Do you have a gift shop? Do you have other things?

A: We have a gift shop, yes, yes. The gift shop is run mainly by our daughter. She’s been running it for a number of years and so she helps us out during that time of the year you see, yes.

Q: When you...did your son go to school to specialize in forestry?

A: No, my son did not want to go to college. He went to trade school. He’s an excellent mechanic and a body shop man. He went to body shop and he really became a crackerjack at that. He only had one boss and an old timer who did specialized work in body work.
When David decided that he wasn’t going to make this his livelihood, he gave them notice. The boss just pleaded for him to stay so he gave him three... two more notices after that and finally David said, “I’ve got to go.” So that was the end of that you see.

Q: Now does he... you have your own trucks and he maintains... is that part of what he does now?

A: Yes. Well, we have trained a man who does mechanical work but he is there for assistance and help where there’s need to. He’ll get involved. Yes.

Q: When you start shipping these, these are with regular drivers. Are these your own trucks or do they ship them out...?

A: No. We use basically common carriers that we’ve been dealing with that we do business with, you see. They come in with basically big trailers and they’ll leave a box or a trailer bed and then we’ll load that. While delivering that one then... then when they come back empty, then they... there’s another trailer to pick up you see. Then of course, many accounts pick up their own trees which may include trailer as well. So, we’ve had trees that go as far as Indiana you know.

Q: Did you ever ship by train?

A: Beg pardon?

Q: Do you ever ship by train?

A: No, no we don’t ship by train. I don’t think much product is shipped by train in these days but I could be wrong. I don’t think so, yes.

Q: What do you think was your greatest satisfaction in what you’ve done between your poultry farm and your tree farm? Why did you do it? I mean, what kept you doing that? So what was your greatest satisfaction from farming basically?

A: Well, I guess I’ve always been my own boss and I tended to feel that I wanted to be self-employed. I did like growing trees. Even when I was little I always had a great respect for trees. I just didn’t cut a tree indiscriminately. I had a tendency to want to shape the tree so that the tree can grow in what I would consider a better advantage. So I was always partial to growing trees and... and basically anything. But more so with trees you see. And so... so I... I’ve always had the satisfaction of... of just tree farming even more so than poultry. So I don’t... I didn’t mind poultry so much but of course, I like the environment better with trees and especially today. Yes.
Q: Did you learn how to do this through going to classes or conferences or talking to other people or how did you learn more? Because...because right now there are new machines, and there are new ways of doing things so how did you gradually pick up on these?

A: Well, I...naturally if there are any courses involved, I certainly took courses. I don’t care what it was, if there was accounting or...or trees or eggs or poultry, I would attend you see. And so I made sure that anything that was available, I would know about it. So that’s probably is... much knowledge as I could acquire you see, yes.

Q: Now did you have any connections...go ahead.

A: All right. Well then, Phyllis is trying to tell me that we do attend all the...many conventions you see. Like we’re members of the National Christmas Tree Growers Association. They do have conventions throughout the country, here and there you see. And we try to attend most of those that we can. And then of course, we do...then they have midwinter conferences too and we try to attend to some of those as well. And then of course, the state has twilight meetings and of course, we attend those. And of course, naturally we had to keep up with our certification and application licenses. So we had to keep up with that as well. So through the state and through national that’s where we tend to get much of our knowledge. And of course, we do get magazines, periodicals that we get in the mail and I read those. And of course, now that David has taken over, he’s doing it. Then of course, we do have to promote our product through all the many trade shows. We try to take in all the major ones between Boston and Baltimore. So that takes quite a bit of time to cover those and to have a setup at each and every show, you see, yes.

Q: All the dog and pony shows.

A: Yes.

Q: Good. Did you have many connections with town? Did you...did you get involved in town things either on...on boards or commissions or...?

A: Well I have been on the school committee.

Q: Finance, budgeting?
A: Not the finance. I've been on finance but anyway this is...this is the what do you call the board that...the School Board, not the School Board but the...

Q: Board of Education?

A: Board of Education. Yes, I've been on that. I've been Chairman on that. I have not been in town politics, so I have not taken any position there you see. Yes.

Q: Did you have to run for the Board of Education?

A: I had to run for it, yes.

Q: Why did you decide to do it?

A: I think I was asked. Yes, I think I was asked. I think that was the main reason, yes.

Q: I want to...
(Tape interruption.)

Where does someone in tree farming go for insurance or financing?

A: Well, financing I haven’t had to do and ...so what was the first question?

Q: Or for insurance?

A: Oh, for insurance. Well, I just deal with the same companies I have always dealt with in the past except through National Christmas Tree Growers of course. They have an insurance that is competitive and more so that has better liability coverage than I've been carrying. But any farm fire insurance or life and whatever or even a certain amount of liability has come from Mutual Fire Insurance Companies you see. I've maintained basically the same company. Yes.

Q: Would you talk about a little bit about the equipment that you now use to basically package your trees. You didn’t get a tree that was bound up when I was growing up ...and now you have balers? Is that what it’s called?

A: Yes.

Q: And would you describe that?
(Tape interruption.)
A: Well, the baler has been around a long, long time. And of course, to make it more efficient. It’s because of the cost of the baler, it’s better to be a certain size so that it makes it sensible to use a baler for efficiency purposes. Of course, the big advantage of using a baler is that it’s much easier to load the tree than trying to load a loose tree you see. Then you can put more trees onto a truck and it’s more easy to unload. And of course, before you can bale a tree of course, you have to cut the tree and you have to bring the tree on site of the baler. Then you bale the tree and of course, at the same time you...you grade the tree for size and even in quality, you see. So that’s what you can do when you...when you bale trees. And then of course, then you load the trees, the baled trees onto a truck and you move the trees from the site to the landing where you’ll be shipping from. So that’s how you do it.

Q: Now, do you take your baler out to different parts of your lots?

A: We take the baler out to the lots, yes. Bale the trees on the lot before we move the tree, yes, to the landing.

Q: And the baler actually basically takes a cord and wraps it around to hold it tight, to the branches tight?

A: Yes. There’s no baling going on here at the time. We had to go to another farm and to see any balers but that’s what happens, yes.

Q: Okay. (Tape interruption.)

How does Christmas tree growing in Connecticut differ from other parts of the country?

A: Well, the advantage of growers in Connecticut is that the market is all around them. So, we have the advantage that we can cut our trees later, we have it right here. The nurseryman does not have to go way up north to buy their trees, you see. Provide they can get the volume and the quality and whatever they’re looking for. So that’s the big advantage. In other words, we’re located in the area where the sales are the greatest you see. So that’s one advantage of growing trees in Sou...anywhere in Southern New England you see, yes.

Q: Very interesting. What...what do you think’s brought you the greatest joy in the...in your life here?

A: Is this in work or is this in girls? Well, I guess just growing trees has been a satisfaction there. I’ve had no great happenings to me that I could get really excited about. And life has been good, it’s been hard. It hasn’t been easy in that sense.
And of course, I’m maybe a stubborn Finn so I’m determined when I do something. I’m just persistent that I’m going to do it you see. And then that kind of helps in the long run and so anyway that’s it. And of course, as far as any recreation is concerned...
(End of side one.)

...any one thing in general that’s outstanding and I’m not a skier, I’m not a golfer, I’m not a tennis player and whatever so...

UV: Arnold, Arnold, old cars.

A: All right, yeah, I have old cars.

Q: Oh, you do?

A: Yes, yes. I enjoy those, yes. So that’s right. Yeah.

Q: How old are any of the cars you have?

A: Well, I have one, a ’47 Packard and David restored it, did a beautiful job on it. I get a lot of compliments on that. Then I have a ‘59 Cadillac and that’s been customized and that’s a beautiful car. And it draws tremendous attention and so it’s a beautiful color. It just...even the little old ladies will just love to look at that car you see.

Q: What color is it?

A: That’s a sort of a green with white interior. Then I have a ‘70 Cadillac that’s pristine and so that has a minimal amount of mileage. And I bought that in Florida, had that shipped...shipped home you see. So.

Q: Now has your wife been part of your farm business or has she been...do you want to come in and talk about this? Do you want to get your voice in here.

B. Yes, I have been a very big part. Yep.

Q: Well, do you want to talk about what you’ve been...what kind of a role you’ve had either in poultry or in Christmas trees? I’ve found...I’ve found examples of women who have been part of the decision-making or part of the management and accounting or people who worked off the farm or people who were mothers and raised the children. So what...where do you fit into that?

B: Well, I was a mother and I raised three children and I worked in the business. I did a lot of jobs.

A: What did you do in the business I guess is what she asked. Paperwork?
B: Oh, well, I did a lot of paperwork and then a lot of getting ready for our Christmas season and making wreaths at one time. Advertisement, I could go on and on.

Q: How did you learn, I mean, how did you get into the advertising?

B: I had to. So that’s how you learn.

A: Yeah, it’s placing the ads into the papers and so on.

B: Yeah, and making ads, yeah.

A: So we had to, in other words, we’re always looking for circulation you see. And anything from these shoppers guides to...to newspapers, and so on you see. So we try to measure one vs the other and whatever. Some we’ve been in with for years and years and others we’ve tried and found that well, it hasn’t really worked out as well for us you see. Or sometimes you never know but you know you surmise. So...that’s...Phyllis has been very instrumental there, you see. Doing the banking and whatever you see. And making sure we don’t have too many bounced checks and that sort of thing ,you see. So...so that’s...answering the telephone.

B: In our retail business.

A: Retail business is really active right after Thanksgiving. So that’s it. And of course, David. He has designed a machine that he sells all around the country. He’s got these machines everywhere from New England all the way down to Oregon. What it does, is it’s a roping machine. It makes garlands and so it’s much faster than doing it by hand. He has all types of operations using this machine. It’s very...almost foolproof that he’s had little or no mechanical problems with these machines and it just feeds it up. Because what it does, it counts the footage, it coils it and then it...it’s already except just to cut off and start again another row you see. So that’s what makes it convenient. And he has people that feed the machine and it just puts out the product very...and very evenly. Yes.

Q: Now have there been others like these and he improved it because he didn’t like what was...?

A: That’s right yes. This design is what he came out with you see, right, yes. So, yes. So that also keeps him busy there so...so that’s it. Of course, we make wreaths. All our wreaths are finished on both sides where a lot of wreaths today are make where they’re only finished on one side, you see. But we make them where they’re finished on both sides so you can turn them over and you can use the other side. Or you can hang them where you can you know, where you can expose both sides you see. So that’s it.
Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add?

A: That’s basically it, I guess.

Q: You know what we didn’t talk about because we were in the jeep when you talked about this? You have this farm, the original home site of the poultry farm and then you have over the years, purchased an additional farm elsewhere. About you said, twelve miles away?

A: Well, there’s a farm in Preston. It actually is almost next door to the Casino there, Foxwoods. And then we have another farm in Sterling you see. When I say farm, this is just basically land. So with minimal amount of farm structures, it’s where the production is exactly the same as it is here but it could be a different variety of tree or whatever the case might be you see. And so, we have two other farms that we ship from. Yes.

Q: Good. Thank you very, very much for taking the time.

(Tape interruption.)

We’re talking about vacations because I’ve interviewed a lot of people in agriculture who don’t take vacations. And now that they’re older they have. But you talked about going to Florida. So talk about your... You always have gone on vacations?

A: Well, I’ve always gone on vacations but in the early years, it was not anything I could plan and say, “We’re going to take a vacation for two weeks,” or something like that on a given day, on a given month or something like that. That never was the case. If we went on a vacation, it was based on what was going on at the farm at the time if we could get away, you see. Sometimes it was very difficult to get away; sometimes it was easier. But we always tried to get... take some time. In the early years, it wasn’t long, it was maybe a week maybe ten days if we were lucky, something of that nature. And of course, having given up the poultry to go to Christmas trees, of course, it was easier because in the middle of the winter there wasn’t much going on in the tree farm. But at the same time, in the earlier years, when the tree farm was growing, of course, it was the winter that I used to advantage for soil preparation, to prepare the new land for growing trees the following spring. So I had to use that time, then. But anyway, the Christmas tree business basically, is more seasonal than poultry, or any livestock. That’s what’s nice about the Christmas trees. You can... you knock yourself out trying to keep up with it this time of the year but then when it comes Christmas time, after that you find yourself hanging in the air trying to reach the ground. And you’re all keyed up there, you see. So that’s the thing because everything is dead. The telephone doesn’t ring you know. You wonder if everybody forgot you or whatever. So it’s that sort of a situation. But anyway we get used to it and we’ve been doing it for so many years that we accept it. First it was kind of a funny feeling.
So...that’s...but anyway we tend to go. We go in maybe February. We come back maybe latter April. So that’s the thing. We’re fortunate we can go down to our daughter’s who has a place down there in Naples. So we go down there. And then of course, I have connections and I go to the other coast as well. So that’s it.

Q: So some of your friendships through the Christmas tree growers, this gives you a chance to go around the country sometimes to see people?

A: Yes. Well, that’s right. We go to conventions. That’s another thing. Usually the conventions are in the summer and the most recent one we went was in North Carolina into the boon...in the Appalachian area. That was beautiful. So we enjoyed that trip very much. It’s all a mountainous country. Surprisingly, they grow Christmas trees on even land like that with a forty-five degree angle. You wonder how they can...how they can farm it but you know, they have their ways and they do it. They grow tremendous...actually, that’s the...that’s were the Fraser fir originates from you see. And so they grow beautiful trees. But it’s very difficult farming, but it was very interesting to us. And also, because originally it was thought that you can’t grow a Fraser fir except in certain elevations. They have higher elevations than we do. But it has proven we can grow nice Fraser firs too you see, yes.

Q: From your standpoint Phyllis, what’s brought you the greatest satisfaction living in rural farm life?

B: Well, I like... because a lot of my relatives were wheat farmers, I came from out west. And so I had a touch of the farm life, visiting my grandmother. And, my father had wheat. I have to say, my greatest satisfaction is the kids. The children. Even though we’ve been busy, trying to give time; and, nice grandchildren.

Q: And raising the children in this kind of environment?

B: It’s busy, sometimes it’s too busy.

A: Yeah, it is tough, it’s very...we see it on the grandkids. It’s normally daddy, particularly daddy just doesn’t have any time. That was the same with me you know. And it’s...you just can’t be there. You try to be but so many demands on your time that you just can’t be with the family. You have no choice because you have fifty-two weeks of business in about thirty days. And you...and you just can’t...You know, it would be great if you could share that responsibility but to get those key people is almost impossible. And it’s worse now because the unemployment is so low. So that’s the thing you know. And we’re fortunate we have even a couple of the key people that we can kind of count on that do some of the numbers and the figurings and keeping the inventory and so on like that.
Because I mentioned this one fellow who’s farming in the wreath room. He keeps all the numbers together and then he gets them together for David so he can put them out...so then they can be put into the computer and whatever. And you always keep your fingers crossed if it’s all done correctly. Because when your product you know, if it’s an account comes from a hundred miles or a hundred fifty miles that they hired and you don’t have the product ready for them or you don’t have it all you know, you’re the bad guy. And you can’t afford that to happen you see. And this is the thing that helps us so. We’ve been pretty fortunate to be on top of that in most cases because it does happen you see. Even to the best of growers. And sometimes maybe a product isn’t...isn’t as good as you wanted it to be. So you may have to select differently. So there’s so many variables. It’s just typical growing and you know that’s what you’re up against.

B: He’s been busy all...all the time. That’s our selling time. It’s extra busy.

A: But then right after Christmas then begins the trade shows. And that takes up about six weeks you see. And then of course, tax time. And of course, you got to get some of these taxes in there, whatever, paid by January 30th and some in March 1st and whatever. You have to meet all these deadlines and whatever and so thank the Lord, I’m not involved in that anymore. But that’s all that comes right about after Christmas. Then no sooner you get all that behind you and then, you know, it’s another season that starts.

B: It’s all over again planning, ...

A: And the season it’s starts pretty early, too. Because as a matter of fact, if we knew that it’s going to be a mild winter, then we could plant and whatever. Of course, we would even be planting sooner. But you know, you can’t count on it you see. Then of course, working with migrant help here you have to work sixty days with the government and with the state and they hold you right to it. And so that means you have to get all your paper work in before the sixty days. And, you had to have all your housing inspected and your water sampled and all of that. If any of that does not meet the criteria of course, then you...you know, they hold you up and you can’t get your help when you want. So all of this piles right up you see.

B: And we’re responsible for paying and flying them over here.

A: Yeah, you have to pay the transportation and all the fees and whatever. Then you have to provide transportation for shopping and all of that so it’s not a cheap program by any means. The only thing is that these people are good workers and of course, they’ve been coming from year to year. We count on them. Where they leave their shovel, they can just pick it up the following spring. So that’s the advantage there you see. But otherwise, it’s not any cheaper than...than stateside, yes. You know, we would use statesided if we can count on stateside but you can’t, you see.
B: You can’t get any...you can’t

A: Even if stateside is willing, they’ll try it but they won’t...it doesn’t last long you know...

B: People say, “Why do you...why do you hire from out of the country.” And we’ll say “Well, we would be more than glad to hire them here if there were people to work.” So we have to hire them out of the country.

Q: Did this change a lot after the Second World War? I’m thinking of that song, “How do keep them down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?”

A: You’re talking about farming in general?

B: Well, in general, yeah.

Q: Well, in general, but I think...

B: In general, a lot of the young people ventured away from the farm or didn’t want to...

A: Of course, Connecticut never was a big farm state. At least it’s been getting smaller and smaller all the time. And of course, everything changes. For example, when you go back after the Second World War, it was poultry all throughout here. That was big and now most of those organizations, stores and co-ops, they don’t even exist. There’s only one co-op, I think, left in Connecticut that sells feed. But there’s no egg co-ops or anything of that nature. At that time there were a lot of these you see. So that was farming. Small family farming was a great thing and poultry had it’s share of good times you see. There were bad times too. But anyway the egg business was good. The broiler business was good, too, but then it began to change. The changes began to take place around in the ‘50’s. So it wasn’t too long. And then...

Q: That’s when the poultry industry went south?

A: Begin to move south, became integrated. You see, you didn’t have...The small farmers eventually became tenant farmers. They were growing birds for these organizations that would buy the poultry. Or they would grow them, in other words, for them. They were being paid by the week to grow the birds depending on the numbers. And the farmers had to provide the housing and all. So in other words, from becoming a independent farmer they became a tenant farmer. That went on for years and years, as well you see. And then it got to the point that well, some of these farmers found that they could do better giving up the farming and trying something else. Some of them got older and retired and whatever and some sold their farms and whatever. So that...that took place.
And then of course, poultry in general changed altogether because broilers moved altogether out of the area first and then moved down south. And now it's gotten to the point where it's like operations like Perdue and Tyson and whatever, that really control millions and millions and millions of birds you see in one operation. But that hasn't happened yet with Christmas trees. So thank the Lord for that. I think one of the holdbacks is this that...we're talking about growing Christmas trees in Connecticut, is that land is so expensive you know. If one had dreams of growing a real big operation in Christmas trees, even if they had the markets, where would they get the land? The land would be prohibitive, almost. It wouldn't pay to grow Christmas trees you see. So that's...that's what you're up against. So...so anyway, that's a holdback there.

Q: So it would be hard for people to start...

A: It would be hard to start in that sense, yes.

B: The land is so expensive.

A: Plus the fact is, the land demand keeps going up so anybody who has available land, vacant land, so many just think, Well, I'll subdivide it, you see. So that's what happens to the land. Like, Voluntown has been very, very rural. In the past five years it's changed...complexity is changing rather rapidly and even with us. We go down Wiley Road, the same road you came up, there's housing on both sides. Pretty much all that area is been taken up plus the fact that the state owns about sixty-five per cent of the town you see. And of course, that land is not available and hopefully it never will be. So there's a minimal amount of land that's available in Connecticut. I mean in Voluntown.

Q: Is that because of the forest?

A: It's because of the forest. Yes. They own the state forest in Voluntown maybe larger than anywhere in the state you see.

B: But wherever they can find a lot to build, then they will...

A: And that's getting to be a blessing to even newcomers. They say, Ooh yeah. The state forest nearby, you know, they would prefer that as a neighbor than another house. So...so you're seeing that what that's doing is just putting the pressure on the...on...on land values you see. So that's...that's what's happening.

Q: Are...are some people choosing...like when you mention the next generation, how many of them would keep on doing it. Some people don't choose not to.

B: Some ---choose not to.
Q: So then people are selling their land for development rather than saving it for another...

B: Yes, generation.

Q: ...like through farmland preservation.

B: That's right.

A: Oh, yes, yes. Now that the farm buyout is a good program as long as the farm always stays in that state. But to me that's like selling your children's inheritance or grandchildren...in the sense. Well, once the State of Connecticut becomes your partner, then of course, you have signed an agreement that you have taken this money and this land could no longer be used for any other purpose. It cannot be subdivided even if for farming. It has to...it has to stay in it's entirety you see. And so that's a kind of a curse. We have been looking for land and there is some of this land available. But we are finding that you cannot...in other words, if it's one farm, you can't make two farms out of it.

Q: Oh, I didn't know that.

A: So anyway there's a lot of restrictions on that you see. And so that's the downfall there. Of course, if values keep going up all the time, those farm values are not going to change much. But, how many farmers are going to be buying and expanding, especially in Connecticut? So there's a lot of this land actually, that is available you see. But it's...as I say, it has to stay in farming.

Q: Thank you again.

(Tape interruption.)

We're going to keep adding on to this. During the Depression when you said that the state owned land, they bought it up during the Depression.

A: Okay. The state began acquiring land. In other words, during the beginning of the Depression, the state owned a minimal amount of land, if any. Then they...through a program in Legislature, it was realized that these farms like in Voluntown, were basically abandoned farms as I mentioned to you. And so a program was developed whereby the government would buy this land from these farmers who couldn't actually get rid of it. In other words, the timber was worth more than the land itself. In some cases, the early timbering...the...cutting of the logs...the logmen ended up with the land because of...after the farmer sold his timber, he had no use for the land and he didn't want to pay the taxes. Remember I mentioned about taxes you see. That was...it was always a big issue you see. And so that's these things.
Most of these people, farmers in the early days, they grew what they could. They had little or no means to buy anything and they...so it was subsist...substance right off the farm. In other words, it was that type of living you see. Bartering in some cases and whatever. So anyway, then is when this program came about, this land was available. These farmers had little or no use for it and starting selling it you see. And so many large tracts you see. That was...actually, that’s when they had the large tracts you see. The state or between the state and U.S. Government would buy all these farms and tear down the buildings, the beautiful farmstead homes. They took them down. So that was...the state was only interested in the land. They weren’t interest in maintaining buildings so that’s why you had these old foundations around and then a cause for a lot of bottle collectors. I know one collector in New London area. He had a fantastic collection and about ten, twelve years ago he sold his collection for several million dollars; just by going around on weekends to these old foundations and collecting these old bottles you see. So that was what it was. So as I say, that timber, what ever is growing on the land is worth more than the land itself you see, yeah.

Q: Now, the CCC (Civil Conservation Corps) Camps came in about that time.

A: The CCC Camps came around in the mid '30's, early to mid '30's right, yes. Camp Lonergan was one of the most famous ones and that was pretty well known you see. That was right up here in Voluntown where we call the Mount Misery area. Yes. There still is a building or so left there.

Q: I think Stafford has a CCC Camp Museum. I will do that sometime, it’s interesting.

A: Yes, yes. That was a blessing because those young men in those days, they would be paid a dollar a day and they’d get their shaving stuff, they’d get their clothes. They had nice uniforms to wear, had dress uniforms as well as work. The government provided good equipment, trucks and whatever and everything was done by hand. They’d put in all these roads and these roads, they’re very well. The gravel is still there to this day. They would mix it. They would know so many parts of this and so many parts of that 'cause labor was almost valueless you see. And they really put in some really good roads that are really holding up well today. And that provided a livelihood. There are a lot of people that...a lot of young men that’s how they started their life you see. Yeah. They had to maintain standards and so...and it was...it was Civilian Corps., so they did everything, whatever it might have been you know. So that was planted there and reforested land and so on. So it was a good thing. And that was all over the country, it wasn’t just New England, yes.

Q: Thank you for adding that.