CONNECTICUT 20TH CENTURY AGRICULTURAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORIES

Interviewer: Luane J. Lange

Name of Person Interviewed: Joyce Okonuk

Date of Interview: December 9, 1999

Transcriber: NIM Transcription

Interviewee Address: 

Q: ...has a family background of small family farm. Thank you for agreeing to do this. Would you start out talking about where you were born?

A: I was born...well, my parents actually lived in Niantic, Old Lyme, initially. When I was two years old, we...we lived in Niantic, Old Lyme section and we moved to Ledyard when I was two years old. Moved into what was at that time, a small farm off of Route 12. On the corner of Long Cove Road and Route 12. And my Father worked at Electric Boat, General Dynamics and had always had a love for farming, had been brought up on a farm. So we had a very small farm on that tract of land off of Long Cove.

Q: Now you said he...how small a farm? Like how many acres?

A: Oh, very small there. It was land locked because of Route 12 and Long Cove. I don’t believe that parcel was larger than four acres, five acres. Because of that, he had room for the house and the barn and he so raised rabbits. And back then... this was back in 19...we moved there in 1952 and we were there until 1960. Because there was a shortage of land, we did have a couple of cows that we milked, a couple cows that were beef, goats. But rabbits were the main thing that he produced there because they took up a very small amount of space. He had huts or hutches off the back of the cow barn. And because we lived in the area where it was primarily military, because the submarine base was within a couple miles of there and many of the people that were stationed there were southern and many of them ate rabbit normally as part of the regular diet. So my Father had a large sign that said, “Rabbits fresh or dressed.” And we routinely raised and butcheted rabbits and sold them by the pound out of the house. And then of course, at Easter or other holidays or for pets, people would buy the live rabbit for those purposes. My...my biggest memory as a child, a young, young
child was the first task, real barn chore was taking care of the rabbits. And of course, that meant in the wintertime you know, when everything was freezing temperatures we watered out of not the fancy sophisticated you have now but rather cans, like coffee cans cut down or small short cans. It was be going out there every morning in the winter and replacing all the frozen cans with thawed cans with water, checking their food and then bringing the cans into the barn where the cows were which was warmer. Then the cans would be set on the floor and they would thaw all day long with the heat of the sun and the animals and then at night you came home from school and by then if it was cold outside, they would have refrozen. And then you'd reverse it all. Go back out with the empty cans and rewater.

Q: So how old were you then?

A: I was...well, I was two years old when we moved there so I probably...was probably six, seven, eight, nine years old. And that was one of the tasks. But being a girl, I wasn’t expected to do as much work in the barn at that age, as my brother. I have a twin brother and at that time I had an older brother who was eight years older who was probably high school age then. In fact, I think he graduated from high school. He was at Norwich Free Academy then. He graduated before we moved here in ’60. So the two boys did a lot of the work to help my Father out. He would leave for work... he had to be at work at seven o’clock every morning and they had to be in school. So they would get up at some ridiculously early hour like four o’clock and go out and do whatever milking...’cause we had no milking machines. It was all hand milked. Everything was hand done. My Father had a very difficult time making ends meet so the farming was a way of adding income and food to the household.

Q: Now you said he came from a farming background. Where did he come from?

A: He lived in Ledyard. He grew up. His parents had a small...actually, a lot of acreage but a very small farm up on Vinegar Hill Road in Ledyard. His Father was a very elderly gentleman when my Father was born. So he basically had a Father who was retired before he was even old enough to barely remember him. So the mom was sent out of the house to work for people who were well-to-do in New London. Cooking and cleaning during the week and then she would come home weekends and she would cook and clean and do everything on the weekends to get her family ready so she could leave them Sunday night and have a transportation back to New London to work. So basically, whatever animals were raised on his farm, and it was very small scale; cattle enough probably for their own use, meat, milk, cheese and so forth. That’s the kind of farm they had. So that’s how he came from...

Q: Was she much younger than her husband?

A: She was much younger. Yes, he was...

Q: Second wife?
A: No. Only wife but I would say there was at least twenty years, maybe twenty-five years difference in their age.

Q: Had he come from a farming background?

A: I'm not really familiar with his background. I know he wasn't a very high energy person and even though my grandmother was extremely high energy, had an incredible tolerance of lack of sleep, keeping up the load. I think a lot of that she had to assume because he simply was sort of a lazy sort. And because my memory of him...he died when I was five, is very, very, very small. I never saw him as being a real ambitious person. So she carried the full load but I'm sure the children that they raised on that farm also took care of the farming aspects 'cause I don't see him ever doing anything other than commanding people around and expecting that they would do the work.

Q: How many siblings did your Father have?

A: Father? There were five total. Five total.

Q: Did any of them go into farming?

A: No. None of them did. No. But my Father always had an appreciation for animals. He was a difficult sort of contrary man who had a very rigid Yankee work hard, if everything in life is worth doing, it's worth doing right. He was pretty much focused on working continuously. He related well to animals and I think that's one of the reasons that probably kept him. He wasn't good around people and he was very good with animals. He had a good sense of caring for them, of making sure that they were properly fed, watered and he instilled that value in us. To this day, the five of us have had this instinctive need to work continuously and also to be very responsible for whatever we've done. I think that's a value that comes out of that homegrown farming background.

Q: So then when did you meet ---?

A: We left Ledyard...well, my Father actually decided in the late '50's that he really wanted to do more farming and the site wouldn't permit it there. So together with my Mother's Father who lived in Waterford, they started seeking out, every weekend we would drive from farm to farm to farm, if it were in Lisbon, in Ledyard and all through this area looking for a land that they could afford to buy. Like I said, their income was modest so we ended up settling in Lebanon in 1960 because there was house that was for sale with about sixty acres of land but it was certainly a handyman's fixer upper. And my grandfather who was a carpenter...

Q: Now this was your Mother's Father?
A: My Mother's Father.

Q: And had they come from agriculture?

A: No. He'd had chickens and a small amount of animals but not anything extensive. But he always had a love of farming so he was very excited when he heard that his son-in-law was going to be looking to buy a bigger farm. And so he I think, actually financially assisted them in buying the house in Lebanon and if I'm remembering correctly. That farm in 1960 was bought... it was a house, a big barn, multiple outbuildings and the house was at least a three or four bedroom house. And I bet you that whole property went for thirty thousand dollars but to them it was like a million because they didn't have the resources. So they sold their house. I think they bought the house in Ledyard for eight thousand and which was a big three story, very large house. Then we settle into this little place, which once you go through the filth of the place and got the place cleaned up which my Father did a very nice job of doing. And much to my Mother's dismay, who did not want to go on to anything bigger than what they were on, especially not a farm, because she was not the farming sort, they did move to Lebanon. My Mother continued screaming the whole way and settled in. Then they stayed there until my father finally became ill in health and then had to sell and build a new home 'cause he couldn't maintain.

Q: Did he build on some of that property?

A: Yes. He did. But when we got to Lebanon it was really very exciting for him. Not for me because I knew we'd have more farm work to do. And at that time, I was ten and then my older brother had graduated from high school and was living on his own. So it was just my twin and I at home. I was able to get a horse which I could never have before. Someone gave us an old race horse that was retired out. So we had pigs now. We had a donkey, a mare and a foal pony, a horse, several cats, maybe three or four as opposed to the one or two we had before. But the thing that was difficult was even though we had a lot of land, most of it was not farmable land it was wooded land. So there may have been ten acres tops of open land maybe less. So what my Father would do in Lebanon just like he did in Ledyard was he would make arrangements with other people in the town that had open land that wasn't being farmed. And they would either lease it to him or they would just let him use it for nothing just so that he would keep the field down and keep them from becoming overgrown. So as we did there, we did in Lebanon. So during the day for example, in the summertime, my Father believed in children working at all times clearly, he would find work, busy work just to keep you going at... there was never a dull moment in your life. So with the land either that we had or that he had gotten permission to use in Lebanon, at night after work he would come home and he would go out and cut the hay. We had our own tractor and like a sickle bar. And then the next day my brother and I would go out with hand rakes, the wooden hand rakes, and we would hand rake the... because we didn't have a rake, an automated rake. So we would rake everything into windrows like in the morning and then maybe like one or two o'clock in the
afternoon go out with a hay fork. My Mother would drive us there if it was away from the house and we would turn all the windrows over. And then if weather permitted, when my father would get home at night, we would think about taking it in and baling it. We didn’t have a baler for a long, long time. This was like a major purchase even a used one. So a couple times I can remember my Father would have hired a farmer to come out with a baler and at the point we would have windrowed it one day and then raked it into big piles. Or they would pull the baler down the rows and it would pick up from the windrows. Depending on what the situation was.

(If) You couldn’t get someone available with a baler, then we would rake it up and bring it in loose. But I don’t remember that happening as often as it being baled on site. Then eventually my Father was able to buy a used baler and we would do our own. And I think...I’m sure if he had a baler at some point he must have bought an automatic rake. I just...I just really can’t remember that too well right now. I just remember all the hand raking and how much I hated it. And my Father being as frugal as he was, not only did you just rake the main part of the field, you also had to go around under every bush, every tree, every rock and make sure that every scrap of hay was taken in. And if it wasn’t done to his satisfaction you could be well sure that the next day after it was baled you were back there the next day raking up the scatterings. Then you would come back and pick them up loose because nothing was wasted.

Q: Now did he...was this for your own use or did he sell any of it?

A: No, it was for our own use to feed our own animals. Yeah. And then he made cheese. I can remember seeing him making cottage cheese when as young as I was in Ledyard, we had...like I said we had a three story very big house which is a lovely house now. Well, they didn’t have the resources to make it as beautiful as it could have been but upstairs in what was like a library/study room, the sun would come in in the afternoon and he used to lay trays, stainless steel trays of milk on the floor up there. I can remember it becoming cottage cheese and thinking it was the grossest thing I’d ever seen. I probably didn’t eat cottage cheese ‘til I was thirty because of it. But he did make his own cheese and he...he really had a good instinct for preserving. He’d make pickles sometimes or show my Mother how to make pickles. All things he had learned from his mother who did everything, all of that sort of thing. My Mother never worked the farm at all. Her job was an at home Mom. She did the cooking and the cleaning. I don’t every remember seeing her ever even in the barn, never mind helping do any of the work. We had a vegetable garden. Not down in that town but up here and she did do a small vegetable garden, which she didn’t enjoy the...she enjoyed the canning and everything. She didn’t enjoy working the garden. She had never been brought up in the environment where she was ever expected to so she either had no interest or didn’t have the skills and the knowledge to do it.

Q: What were your neighbors like? Both in Ledyard and then here?

A: There neighbors in Ledyard were almost all military.
Q: And did they have...

A: Transient neighborhoods.

Q: And did they have several acres also?

A: No. No. We were like the only little farm stuck into a tract of regular houses. There was a trailer park up the street with mobile homes. There was a gas station across the street from our house. There was a man with some chickens. He sold eggs down the street but he didn’t have a lot of land. He had like a small chicken coop, a very elderly gentleman. Everybody by us was military. There was nobody else farming on our tract. Well, when we came to Lebanon of course, Lebanon had a lot of active dairy farms and...and all different degrees too. There were poultry farms, small scale up to large scale. But in our neighborhood on our street, I venture to guess, other than maybe Mr. Malendorf who did have a small farm which he did full time, no one else farmed on our street then. In fact, our road was just paved. I found out since I’ve been here, our road was paved the year before we moved to Lebanon. It was a dirt road in ’59 and then paved. All the farming in Lebanon at that point were mainly full farms, farming with an entire family which was very, very different from us. And I think the problem...the problem with it was that we never had enough income to really do it full scale and it was a struggle all the time. For example, at night you’d come home. It’s time to bale the hay. You have this very narrow window that you could do it in. Or the baler would break down immediately. Or you’re working against the clock because the sun’s going down. It’s supposed to rain the next day. You didn’t have the luxury of having a full day for the baler to break down that morning ‘cause you’re at work. So you had to fit everything....and that included at night baling, milking the cows.

Q: Did you father ever work the night shift at Electric Boat?

A: No, never. It’s always a day shift and he’s the sort of fellow that never missed a day of work so it wasn’t like some folks would take vacation time. And you know, if he had any vacation coming to him, I’m sure it was used to come home and work the farm. But to call in sick or do anything like that, never. He was as dedicated to his job there as he was to his farm at home. We never took vacations, never went anywhere that I can ever recall and if they did, my parents would have done it alone. It would never have included the children. And whether that was just his basic nature or whether that was what they financially needing to do, I don’t know.

Q: Do you...do you know when his family emigrated here?

A: No. We have a genealogy of his mother fully back to whenever the beginning of the recordskeeping when they could...it was very thorough. But we don’t have any record of his father. I know that his...I have this sorting diary of his great-great...I guess three great-grandfather who was in the Civil War. And that had passed down to me,
I've just donated it to the town's museum. Jonathan Irving Reynolds was his father's name and I think his mother was a Maynard. Old definitely Yankee backgrounds, English, yeah. English, Irish, whatever blending you want to say. Yeah. But I don't know much about the background before that. He was a very private...my father was and his father was extremely private, a non-communicative sort of guy.

Q: What did your neighbors do or they were all full-time farmers? Was it any different down there?

A: Well, my father didn’t interact with people even in Lebanon. He kept to himself. Our farming would have been done...There was one person down the street maybe five miles away on a different road actually who he sort of befriended, who did some small scale farming. He’s really a heavy equipment operator and did farming on the side. Other than that my father really didn’t truck with anyone in town. They very much kept to themselves.

Q: So then how did you and your brother...what was school like?

A: Pretty routine. I think the problem with me...it was easier for me. My father expected so much from him and at the time when he wanted to play sports or he wanted to do other things always met with resistance. He was...especially in high school when he wanted to be on the soccer...in fact, he was co-captain of the soccer team. Just every game was a battle with my father. “I need you home.” “You shouldn’t be going to this.” So it was a very difficult time and I think it impacted my brother for the rest of his life actually. The relationship with them was not good. Whether it was my father’s gruff demeanor or his need to have help all the time, I don’t really know what that was. I probably was closer to my father than any of the children as there were three older siblings. We were a second generation.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: I had an older sister and brother that were twelve and thirteen years older than me. And the brother that was eight years older. So by the time I had any recollection, they were, other than the one that was eight years older, the rest were already out of the house and I have no recollection of them at all at home.

Q: What did he do at Electric Boat?

A: He was an outside machinist. Worked in the submarines building and retrofitting probably machinery inside the sub. It was a very difficult job and very stressful job. In fact, he ended up contracting asbestosis from the fiberglass there and was one of the first cases involved in the Union lawsuit against Johns-Manville. He was fully loaded with asbestosis and died at a young age because of it. He died at sixty, was diagnosed at sixty...Well he wasn’t well up to that but I think he was actually diagnosed at sixty years old and immediately had to retire. He had a tumor in one lung and a hole in the
other and then had six or seven years in very poor health. Not that it stopped it any. He still would push himself continuously but he ended up dying of well, ruptured aorta but it was due to the stress on the heart and the lungs.

Q: And you went to NFA?

A: I didn’t no. By the time we moved here, my brothers and sisters...sister and two brothers had graduated from NFA. But my brother and I went to school in Lebanon. See back then, Ledyard didn’t have a high school. So it was a sending town to NFA. When we came here my parents were like, “Well, should we send them to this school, should we send them to that school? What should we do?” And they ended up allowing us to go to school within this town which was good because that’s what we wanted to do. You get to know the kids in your own community. And that was...that was a good experience. It really was. I think as...as we got older in high school, my father’s farming started decreasing ‘cause he was getting older too. You know, he couldn’t keep it up. And maybe their income had increased enough where my mother went to work once we were in high school. There’s another income coming in and little by little started scaling it down. Then my brother graduated from high school and he basically wasn’t farming at all.

Q: What did your mother do when she went to work?

A: She went to work in a department store just in the area, just to get her out of the house. She had some difficulty with depression I would say after probably change of life. You know, middle part of her life and she really needed a change of scenery. And she had a...it was a difficult situation there so I think getting out of the house was a good thing for her. Gave her a little independence and gave here some income and she seemed to enjoy it very much. She talks about it fondly now, so it was a good...it was a good thing for her.

Q: What were your friends like? I mean, were they from other farming families?

A: A lot of my friends are from farming families. I had some that weren’t but a lot of the large farmers, a lot of them had children my age. I used to go to their farm and you know but of course, they had milking machines. I keep thinking, did we have a kind of milking machine...? I don’t think we did. I think it was all hand milked the last.But oh yeah, you know, we used to spend time all the time in the summers. By then my father was scaling down. By the time I got old enough to interact with other kids and go to other people’s houses in like junior high and high school, my father’s level of farming had decreased significantly. Like I said, what was expected of me was not what was expected of my brother at that point in my life. Plus we started picking up part-time jobs as soon as we were old enough. I did a lot of baby-sitting. My brother...other brothers worked on other farms in the summer for extra money when they were growing up. My brother did here, too. He would work on...there’s a big farm along Route 2, the Savage brothers and John Savage ran that farm at the time.
He had a big corn stand. He sold a tremendous amount of sweet corn and they would farm and they worked part-time there too. So basically we were always working.

Q: When they earned money, did they...were they able to keep it or did they turn it over to part of the family?

A: They could keep it if it was used for like the necessary things like clothing and other...yeah. Or to maintain a vehicle to get them back and forth to work if they were to have a car. Yeah. It was never expected to contribute to the operation of the house. My father was too proud. He never would have accepted that, never in a million years but it would never even come up. You would have been expected to be basically on your own. From the time we were twelve, I can remember working cleaning houses, baby-sitting, ironing. In high school, I went to work in the office at Grand Lake Spa up here, switchboard operator in summers. I have a pretty high rate of speed typing so I did a lot of clerical work. I worked for a printer that was in Lebanon typing page-set for him. We always worked. I mean, there’s just...that’s what I remember.

Q: Is the Grand Lake Spa still here?

A: Yeah. It’s a spa now, it was Grand Lake Hotel then. It was a kosher hotel and it was very popular and a lot of the kids in Lebanon worked as waiters, waitresses, chambermaids. But I worked in the office. Even off-season I would work there in high school to prep for them for the holidays and the things coming up, the mailers and stuff. But we always worked. I mean, hanging around with nothing to do, that would never, ever, ever have happened. I mean, I can’t even remember having enough time free. I remember playing with my younger brother or my twin brother but having nothing to do? Never.

Q: Did you have television?

A: We had television right before we left Ledyard. So that must have been in ’58/59 period, we had our first television. I can remember that. My father actually loved television and which is kind of a funny thing for a guy like that but he...once it was too dark to do anything, then he loved his TV movies. You know, the westerns and all the things that were so popular when television became popular. I can remember that being on, yeah.

Q: What happened to the farm then? You said...you mentioned they sold it?

A: Well they sold the house...

Q: You and your brother had already left?
A: Yeah. At that point, did I live in the new house with them? No, I married while they were still in the old house. My brother had been married many years before me. But I stayed at home. He married very young like eighteen or nineteen and I married at twenty-one, twenty-two.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

A: In high school. Yeah, we’re married almost thirty years.

Q: And where did your brother meet his wife?

A: Same place, high school. We decided we couldn’t do anymore. My father really wasn’t well and he was scaling down slowly, slowly, slowly anyway. They sold the house and five acres which included the barn to a couple...actually Navy folks that wanted to do the same type of farming my father had done, ironically enough. Didn’t quite have the ambition and the skills to get there. It wasn’t a real success story. Mainly because he’d be out to sea. And a wife and three daughters and... come on...and my parents built a new home on five acres up behind where my husband and I built our house. And then my father sold a big tract of land to one person who built one home on it with a right of way to it. The Shrimptons bought the house after my father and mother sold their house and five and another family eventually bought it from them, the Andersons who are still there now and they have just done a wonderful job not...never raised animals. He grows a very large garden. He maintains all the properties. He has a little orchard he put in. The big, big field behind the barn he let’s the neighbor that bought the house that has a long setback, the big acreage. They have horses and they actually...the horses keep the fields down. And Carl has taken meticulous efforts to try to restore and maintain all the buildings that were left.

Q: Where did they come from, the Shrimptons?

A: The Shrimptons were Navy folks from the south. I don’t really know much about where, they were originally from the south. And the Andersons came from Massachusetts.

Q: Oh, the Andersons are the second...?

A: Yeah, the Andersons are the ones that are still there now.

Q: Oh, okay. Had they been in agriculture before?

A: No. Actually, ironically enough, she was a...he was a brother and she was a nun. But they wanted to come out to an area where they could have...they loved gardening and they had just...

Q: They had left their Order?
They had left their Orders and they had just gotten married and they had decided that they wanted a fresh new start. She lived in inner city Boston most of her life and worked in the streets with troubled women. Not your typical nun, more of an on-street, hands-on sort of person. And he'd been a very, very involved Order of brothers where they just did public service and --- for twenty-some years. And they ---same point. It just happened, this is no longer what they wanted. They just decided they were going to...they met up after they left the Order and decided that they fell in love and that was it. And they’ve been our best...good neighbors and good friends ever since. And have actually a son now. He’s thirteen. They were married ten years before he came along, a little surprise--- and they’re really nice folks. Paul has a very good sense of...of the land. And he has done wonderful things to the land. He composes everything. Everything is done...everything is done organically. Nothing is done with chemicals...

Carl (Paul?) lives his entire life totally natural so...and he looks wonderful at his age.

Q: Do you remember the town connections? You said your parents did not interact. Now here you are and...and...and...how did you...

A: Very different.

Q: How did you evolve into this? What stages did you go through?

A: Well, I was always involved in high school. I was very quiet, I was very shy actually. I shouldn’t say quiet. I was very low confidence level and very nervous, high strung. Talked a lot. ---All the time. So I got involved a lot in school in different projects and on the town newspaper and chairing, all that sort of thing. But I always had an opinion about something. I always felt strongly about things and I was never allowed to express them at home. So I think when I got to school, it gave me an outlet to do that because my father’s rule was the rule in all. His opinion was THE opinion. You could have one but it didn’t count because you never got it heard. And I think...I think that ---needing to state my mind, to become involved was important to me from a very young age. And even though I didn’t have the real good confidence level, as I got older that sort of came along. And then eventually...well, my husband and I decided to have a home and then eventually our family came, I was asked if I could become involved in Board of Education. I ran for the Board of Ed and that’s how I first ran for public office. Oh my gosh. My children were just babies practically. I did that for a few years and then was out of it completely for a number of...we were busy raising a family and I was working.

Q: How many children did you have?

A: Two.
Q: And where did you work?

A: Well, initially, I went to work out of high school, Pratt and Whitney. I had...

Q: This is in Hartford?

A: In East Hartford, yeah. I had left school with pretty much straight A’s and decided that...my husband was going to college and my parents could not afford to send me. So I said, well you know, at that time my boyfriend, I said, “Well, you’re going to college, I have this good job offer.” I typed it was an incredible speed per hour and I did shorthand and Pratt and Whitney was hiring like crazy. So I went to the Engineering Department there and was hired immediately. I ended up working there eight years before the children were born and I loved it. And I learned a lot and enjoyed it a lot until I decided to stay home and have my children. It was you know, it was really difficult financially but also it was just difficult being out of that loop of working with people. But I did it and I did all kinds of things when I was at home. I mean, like in sewing men’s shirts and we painted houses and we did everything we needed to do to supplement that lost income. And just became --- sent one to nursery school and they needed someone to chair it and they needed somebody to chair this and also my name was coming up and that’s kind or what happened. But I’ve always cared a lot about my community, definitely my family. Very much about my community and I think when they asked me to run for office, I had no intention ---I wasn’t even on the Town Committee but the present Selectman was no longer going to run and he was on the party that I am now with. And they called and said, “Could we talk to you?” I didn’t have any idea what they wanted ‘cause I didn’t’ even know he wasn’t running again. And he said that he wasn’t and would I consider it? And I said, “Well.” Actually, my children were in high school then and I said, “Well, funny you should mention this because I had given thought to that before but wasn’t sure with young children if I could handle the load.” In deference to my kids. And I said, “This is a family decision.” So I asked my children and my husband and the kids were like, “We thought you should have done this a long time ago. Yes, you should do this.” And they were so cute about it. But that’s when I decided to run in 1991 for the first time. Really I have been having incredible luck with the town and a need to see that the quality of life here remains what it is. I have no other real reason for running. And I said, “If I win, I win. If I don’t, I don’t.” And I won like by a landslide and I’m still in shock over that ‘cause I wasn’t really sure the town was ready for a woman. They had never even had a women on the Board of Selectmen never mind a woman as a First Selectman. And I wasn’t convinced at first that this was going to work. I did a lot of door to door that year. Oh my goodness, I took...I left my other job. I was full-time that summer. I bet you I visited four fifths of this town, every door and talked to people and asked, “What about town do you like, what about the town are you concerned with?” You know, I mean, I just kind of understood what the needs were. It’s still...

Q: Yeah.
And so anyway, I ran for office the first time and have been here since. This is my fifth term.

Now, does your husband commute very far for work?

Yes. My husband commutes all over the state. My husband's in the elevator business, elevator industry. He works for Montgomery County Elevator and last week he was in Plainfield for...

As in agricultural elevators or in building elevators?

Oh, no. Real building elevators. Escalators and elevators. Like Otis.

Okay.

Yeah, he travels all over. He works...
Q: I was thinking that aren't that many elevators in the state.

A: (Right) No, no, not grain elevators. He doesn't want to learn another trade. But he travels a lot. And he comes home every night unless he's like bad weather and he's down state, he'll stay down there but typically he comes home. But he travels thirty-five thousand miles a year easily. So, I'm here and that's that.

Q: Now, you're children are grown?

A: Um hmm.

Q: And you...one just got married recently.

A: Yep.

Q: Are they...

A: She's in grad school, yeah.

Q: What kind of interests do they have?

A: Well, they've never been brought up in the farming environment so they have no farming interest. Although it's...it was funny. They were about half grown and it occurred to me that they were being brought up in Lebanon but they had never been on a farm ever 'cause my parents farm was gone and sold before they ever were born. So I brought them to a couple of different farms here --- it's not the same thing as having the appreciation of being brought up there. Hearing stories and this and that you know, they don't dwell on it. I don't think they really appreciated the work of the farmer or the farming life. They both love animals but to have the desire to have farm animals, neither of them have ever expressed any interest in it. My daughter's going to be...well, she is now a teacher but when she gets through grad school she'll be able to be working full-time. And my son is now in college and looking to major in business. So I don't see that either of them have that desire.

Q: I notice on your wall a Future Farmer of America Award. Were you involved in any of those kind of activities?

A: I wasn't. My brother was in FFA. He was actually an officer in FFA. But I was involved in 4-H and we raised white-faced Herefords, calves. Showed them at the local fairs whenever we were permitted to. That was not too often. We used to do the Lebanon Fair. And yeah, we were very much involved in that. I also, when I had my horse, there was a riding group in town and I'm not sure if they were 4-H or not. I don't think they were. I remember going on one long trail ride where we spent the night with the horses up towards Salmon River but I was so young then. I was probably maybe twelve...eleven, twelve. I mean, I just like followed the pack.
I didn’t really even know probably where I was at the time ‘cause we led a very sheltered life. When we moved to Lebanon I mean, now we have...people zip off to the store all the time. When we moved here, my mother would go to the store like Norwich, usually once every week, maybe every other week. So, there would be weeks on end in the summer that the cars that drove past the house were the people that you saw. It was a different environment that, what of course, the children are being brought up today plus, gas cost money. And so you would make your trips, important trips. And when you would go to the city, you would do it in a way that you took care of all your needs that one time. And that’...I do remember that. There was a man down the road from us who lived on the old Route 2, Tom McGrath. His house was two houses down from my parents’ farm. And he owned a gas station on old Route 2 which is about two miles from...it was an old hand pump and that was a big deal. My mother would need gas and we’d go down to this gas station and watch him turn the crank, pump the gas.

Q: Did she ever learn to drive?

A: She learned to drive but it was late in life. Well, actually, compared to now. She learned to drive when she was probably...probably was in her thirties before we came here. She was thirty when I was born so she would have been forty when we moved to Lebanon ‘cause I was ten. She probably learned to drive when she was in her early thirties out of necessity. Didn’t want to but had to. Had to learn.

Q: And did you have two cars?

A: My father had a truck always and my mother had some old...I remember a LaSalle she owned when we lived in Gales Ferry. This big old thing with running boards...when all the modern cars were coming out with the sleek fins and we had this old...now we’d give a million dollars for it. Yeah, probably a car provided by her parents, to be honest with you. I doubt very much that my father would have been able to do it. Their personal finances were kept very quiet. It was always very secretive. And we were really very poor but you know what? We never knew it. We never knew it. And now that I think back about it, they were really poor. But they never...

Q: But you didn’t feel...?

A: No, ‘cause we always had food, clothes were homemade. Always homemade. In fact, I can remember the time I got my first store-bought, not hand me down, coat and my father...my father took us to Norwich. My father never took us anywhere. It was my mother. And my father drove us to Norwich to the store where she worked and bought us red jackets and we must have been ten or eleven years old. Red parkas with a hood. And I can remember they cost five dollars, to this day, and that was a lot of money then.
Q: Can you think of any of the changes that you’re folks went through when your dad had the farm? You said his...his health is what affected a lot of things but...and you said you...you eventu...you mentioned getting some equipment. Did they ever sell any of the things they made or barter them? Would they barter like with butter or cheese?

A: No, I don’t think that ever happened. I think that my father might have sold hay occasionally when there was a need or he’d raise... Oh, I’ll tell you what he would do. He would raise pigs and he would sell some of the pigs because he would raise one for ourselves and that we would butcher and have for the year. But of course, with a pig, when you’re feeding them you might as well feed two or three. Why feed one? And I think he used to sell the pigs. But to my recollection, he never...he was...he never sold anything out. Even like we’d have...would raise corn for eating. Everything we raised we raised to meet our own needs.

Q: What about the woods and the forest? Did he ever hunt?

A: He hunted birds once in a while. My brothers were hunters. My brothers would go out and do that but my father...even deer once in a while would do. But he never really had the time. That was leisure, that was pleasure and my father never would have let anything that was pleasurable. It just was not in his nature.

Q: What relig...was he religious?

A: Not at all. Although he became a Catholic when he became ill. He converted to Catholicism or whatever and was Baptized. But he was raised in a family where there was...if it were anything it would have Congregationalist roots from his family’s background. But he was never brought up in a faith and my mother being a Roman Catholic, he eventually when he became ill willingly was Baptized and Confirmed.

Q: Did she continue going to church nearly all the time.

A: Yes, it was her responsibility to raise us in the Church which he decreed. He knew nothing about it but, “You’re doing it and you’re taking them and you’re going.” And that’s what happened and that’s the way it was.

Q: What about your older brothers and sisters? Were they also raised Catholic by his...?

A: Yes, same situation.

Q: By the same mother...different mother?

A: Same mother. Same mother but it just happened they decided on a Church...they had an eight a twelve and a thirteen year old. They wanted one more child and it ended up being two. Yeah, but we were really raised completely independent, the generations were so split. Yeah.
Q: Anything else you want to add to this?
A: No.

Q: I'm so glad to have heard you that day when you talked about your family farm which is why I followed you up. Thank you very, very much.
A: Well, thank you.

Q: We were talking about the cartoon about endangered species and the family farm.
A: Um hmm. This was just in the paper this week.

Q: And you were talking about people who don't understand.
A: Well, I think people take...people that live in our town even that are non-farming take farming for granted.

Q: As a landscape around them.
A: They think it's like, it keeps the land open and beautiful and isn't this nice. But they don't understand the difficulties that farming...farmers are going through right now to maintain farming. Property values, cost of product, cost of animals, maintaining equipment, buying new equipment. I think if anything, my focus is going to be...that's my future focus as well as my present focus is to work with people to help them understand the need to preserve farming in Connecticut. Lebanon, but also in Connecticut because I'm here to tell you, after witnessing a lifetime of farms going under in this town, when it's gone, it's gone. It does not come back. And when I first came into office in 1991, I remember there were fifteen active dairy farms in this town. And those fifteen farms at that time constituted the primary income...'cause I did a study on it when I first came here. There primary income was derived from farming regardless of whether it was poultry or cows or hay or whatever. And I bet you there isn't...I bet you there's not seven, six presently living on the income from a farm. Granted the farms that are here now are much larger but they have to be to survive. I'm also happy to see that as one farm starts to go out another farmers buying it up. Plus...but the development rights. The development rights and the Land Preservation Program the State put up about ten years ago whatever, has been critically important to this town. Because if it hadn't been the development rights had been purchased on some many town farms, and luckily the rights were bought, then other farmers ended up buying the farms which has preserved them. A lot of other farmers at low cost to be able to ---

(End of interview.)