Q: We are here to interview John Olsen who has a Christmas tree farm, and are you the Executive Director of the...

A: Connecticut Christmas Tree Growers Association. (Tape interruption.)

Q: This is April 26, 1999. Luane Lange here interviewing John Olsen who is a Christmas tree farmer and at the present time is the Executive Director of the Connecticut Christmas Tree Owners Association...Growers Association.

A: Right.

Q: Yes. John, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview for our oral history project. Can you talk about maybe when and where you were born?

A: Well, I was born in Brooklyn, New York of Norwegian parentage...both my parents came from Norway and then settled in the melting pot in Brooklyn. We moved up to Connecticut, up to Mansfield, in 1932, I think it was. So I was just a little tot and spent my youth and graduated from high school and UConn while living in Mansfield.

Q: Now were you a Forestry Major?

A: I was a Forestry Major, right. Under, at that time, Doc Keinholz and Ed Wyman were the two noted Forestry Profs at the University.
Q: Were they commuting between two schools in Connecticut at the time? Was that during the time when Yale was doing it and UConn was doing it?

A: No, no. It was strictly UConn and Yale still had their Forestry School too. UConn wasn’t an accredited Forestry School at that time. They had everything but the library to become an accredited Forestry School as far as ASAF was concerned. But, I think most of us who had graduated under their tutelage were pretty happy with the schooling we got from them.

Q: Now you moved here from Mansfield then and then when...what did your father do?

A: My dad was a carpenter and a floor layer, floor sander and the work in that field. He started his own business when he came up from New York. Because he came up right at the time of the Depression, there was a time when he would be working in New York and then he’d come home on weekends if there was any work to be gotten. He had bought a farm up here in Mansfield. So we always had a few cows and whatever, chickens and whatnot, sort of a subsistence farming which a lot of people here in Connecticut were at that time. In the late ’30’s my brother decided he wanted to be...he wanted to go into the dairy business. He had just graduated from high school. He gradually built up a small dairy farm which he had, oh for...I guess he had it up until into the ’50’s. Then...I’m trying to remember when the Mansfield Hollow Dam went in, but it took all his prime land in the process so he wasn’t able to farm it anymore. That’s when he gave up farming and went into building, building homes.

Q: This is your uncle?

A: No, this was my brother.

Q: Oh, oh, oh, oh. I’m sorry. All right.

A: Yeah, yeah Olaf.

Q: Now did...did they take it by eminent domain when they did that? Interesting.

A: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, all the good farmland on the Fenton River. There was a lot of good farmland that went into the reservoir and although periodically, I guess, they are still doing some harvesting of hay and that. There’s no guarantee because you never know when it’s going to be flooded during the summertime. I’ve seen it where the lands were flooded right in the middle of the summer before they had a chance to harvest the hay. People who were harvesting, taking a chance as to whether they could, would be able to get a crop off of it.

Q: Now what...when did you start your...where did you start your forestry career?
A: My forestry career was with the...well, I worked for the James L. Goodwin for a little while when I got out of college which is now the James L. Goodwin Forest. And then I started working for the Connecticut Park and Forest Commission. It was out in Barkhamsted at the time...this was back in 1951, I guess, because I got out of college in ’50 and about 1951. I lived in East Hartland. The nursery was being expanded and they were looking for somebody to work to supervise the nursery expansion. In this process too, I got married. I worked at the nursery there in Barkhamsted at People’s Forest until 1955. Then we got hit with that big flood. All the topsoil of the nursery got washed away.

Q: And which flood was that?

A: This was the ’55 flood, in August of 1955. We had to look for another place to put the nursery and that’s how we came down to Voluntown.

Q: Okay. Now, you had...the nursery was...your nursery up in Barkhamsted?

A: Oh, I’m sorry. It’s the State of Connecticut’s nursery, Park and Forest.

Q: And then they moved that one...?

A: And then we moved down here.

Q: Tell me about the flood though. Was it a big rainy season, did a dam break? I don’t...?

A: Well, there were dams that broke. This was on the West branch of the Farmington River and well, the devastation was all over the State actually. Dams went out at Putnam, that’s when Putnam got flooded out. As a matter of fact, I...myself and another person were out visiting other nurseries when this happened and we didn’t know anything about it. I was driving and I noticed a lot of rain, but that’s back when State vehicles didn’t have radios in them so you never could keep track of anything or stuff that was going on. When we got down into around the Scranton area; I was heading for a nursery down in that area, that’s when we found out that the bridge was washed out and we couldn’t go farther. We went to a hotel and found out that there was a big flood. Once we found out what was going on in Connecticut, well, we couldn’t do anything until the next morning. Then we drove back; spent thirty-six hours driving back.

Q: So you were in Pennsylvania then?

A: When this happened, yeah. My wife had just had a youngster. My wife was there with a two-year-old and a two month old baby up in Hartland without electricity, without water, without those other...
Yeah, we drove. I don’t know how many miles. We drove up and down trying to get into Connecticut. At the time, we couldn’t...couldn’t get in. So, I think it was about thirty-six hours of riding before we were able to...to get back...to get into Hartford. And then we were able to cross over a bridge in Windsor and head over toward Hartland. Well, we got as far as Granby and we had to walk. But, I had my vehicle up in East Hartland so I was able to take the other fellow home. We looked down at Barkhamsted but it was quite a, you know, it was quite a chore but something you don’t forget. And when we got to the nursery, it was just devastation. It was very discouraging.

Q: So then...so then you said the topsoil had all been washed away. Where did it end up? Was there another place that evolved as a second place afterwards?

A: No, no. I think that happens in any flood plain. Who knows where it ended up. I’m sure a lot of it settled out. If I remember correctly, I think they measured over twelve inches of rain in that period of time, which would have been about twenty-four hours. Then that was all the rain gauge held. So, we never knew how much rain we actually had there.

Q: So then you...then the State moved the...the nursery here?

A: Yeah. We looked for several different areas to put the nursery and we finally decided that this one down here in Voluntown was in a red pine plantation. The soil was a merrimac sandy loam. We had a water supply, right on the Glasgo Pond and the labor force appeared to be good labor because the textile industry was all going out. So these four factors basically were things that decided we’d put it in down here. Because it had been a red pine plantation, we knew that in all probability, it was not going to have any soil problems that we would normally have if we tried to put a nursery in on agricultural land that had been farmed. Listening and seeing other nurseries that were put in to agricultural lands, often times they’d find that they would run into disease problems.

Q: Who had had the plantation before?

A: This was part of the State Forest fortunately. It was in State ownership as part of the Patchaug State Forest.

Q: Do you know much of the history of the Patchaug State Forest?

A: Well, I have a history of the Patchaug State Forest but it’s a long one.

Q: Oh, all right, we won’t talk about that today then. We’ll add that someplace. So then eventually you moved here, too?
A: So we, my family, moved down in November of ’55. We began clearing the land down here. I guess it was September-October, then we...my wife and I and the children moved down here to a home on Patchaug State Forest. So we moved into that. (Tape interruption.) ‘55 (Um hum.) and continued developing the nursery. Basically, the lands themselves were fairly level but we worked all the property, stripped the topsoil off, brought all the land back to the level that we wanted and the drainage that we wanted. By the following year we had our first seed beds in. We put in the spring, the first seed beds which were going to take two years to go. Well you see, we had one year when we weren’t going to have any trees available, so we had brought in some trees from Pennsylvania. Then we resorted them to suit our specifications and shipped them out. And then also, we tried to salvage some of the trees from the People’s Forest but that was sort of a wasted effort. Either they were washed, the roots were exposed and some...if they weren’t exposed then there were trees covered up with debris from the water going through.

Q: How many acres were you working on?

A: For the new one? The new one is...has about twelve nursery beds. We were able to put in a good irrigation system against the other one at People’s Forest where we were irrigating out of the west branch of the Farmington River where you’re running with fluctuations up and down as far as water levels. At Glasco, no level fluctuations.

Q: So then when did you develop your own place here?

A: We bought the property back early ’60, or ’61. There was a little map that wasn’t then made in 1964. I knew I had bought it a couple of years before then. I had left the nursery. I brought in another person and did what training I could do to him so he could operate the nursery. Then I was given the responsibility of working as Service Forester in Windham and New London County so I was working then with private landowners but still had some responsibility for the nursery. When I was doing the Service Forestry work, I was recommending a lot of times to people about planting Christmas trees on some of their lands that were just growing up into brush. And I had thought, “Well gee, if that’s the case, I’ve got this little bit of...we just bought some land here, I oughta go and put some Christmas trees in so I’ll know what I’m telling people: whether it works or it doesn’t work.” And that’s how we got started with it. We built out house up here in 1968. So, we had started somewhere about 1965 at the latest in actually planting. And then we cleared a little bit of land each year.
At first, we were just wholesaling trees. Then we decided that we would begin to sell on weekends, choose and cut. Right now basically we’re choose-and-cut, and wholesale a few trees, not a heck of a lot. A pretty small operation.

Q: When you wholesaled did you aggregate with other tree growers?

A: No, no. Just with individuals. I made my own sales. Once you had one or two customers then you’d basically have them for as long as you wanted them if you, you know, if you were treating them right. Giving them the quality trees they were looking for and so forth.

Q: Where did the people sell their’s once you wholesaled to them?

A: Most of my customers, at that time, were down in the Groton/New London area. And then oh, some of the bigger stores on their parking lots.

Q: Let’s go back a bit. What do you remember about your school days as you were in other parts of the State and so on?

A: Well, what do you mean by school days, you mean college days or...?

Q: No, I mean elementary school.

A: Elementary school? Well, let’s see here. Well, my elementary school was spent in.... Let’s see, the first two or three years were spent in the...in the Mansfield Hollow School. That was a two-room school where they had first, second and I think third. It’s funny how you forget a little bit, and then a seventh and eighth. And then my fourth, fifth and sixth years were spent up in Storrs Grammar School. When we got in seventh grade, we came back to the two-room. We had a teacher for each of those classes. Actually, when I look back I think it was probably pretty damn good as far as teaching was concerned. Obviously, you had some dedicated teachers but I think you also had an opportunity to...to help one another as well as...because the teacher couldn’t afford to spend all her time teaching one or two students who weren’t getting it. Yet, sometimes you’d be working with other students who had the answers and you could learn.

Q: So how many were in the school?

A: Oh, let’s see. In, I think, we had about...down in the lower grades...well, it would have been the same kids that came again back to the seventh and eighth grade; probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty kids in each room. So there would be different grades in that same classroom.
Q: When you and your brother went off into farming, what did you...?

A: I didn’t go off into farming, he did. I was just a helper.

Q: He went off to farming and you went off to Forestry. All right, what was your father and mother’s reaction.

A: Oh! My mother used to help my brother an awful lot on...on the farm with milking and so forth. They were really...they were happy that the land was being utilized to a greater degree. But I can remember when I was just a kid, my father and another man...there was a field that was just South of the house along the river, probably was about seven or eight acres. They used to cut that by hand with scythes, hand scythes. They had their own way...the design they had made in Norway evidently, and of course, it’s different than the ones you see here in this Country. They were laid on your arm somehow and there was a handle. I’ve forgotten, I wish I had it now. They didn’t do it in all in one fell swoop but they would do it in sections and they would...I can still remember seeing them...seeing them go down the row, one behind the other with this...with the scythe cutting...cutting the grass.

Q: Do you remember when they first went into any kind of other equipment?

A: Well, they had a horse. In fact, my dad had the horse before my brother started farming. I remember burying it. That’s probably all I can remember about the horse. But, yeah when my brother was going into farming that’s when he bought a little John Deere tractor. But prior to that we used to...I can remember, that’s right. We had a truck. And, we had a horse-drawn mowing machine, pulled by a truck. The truck would go along and then I’d be on the back operating the mower. So we were mechanized now, you see, we didn’t have a horse anymore. We were mechanized. Of course, I think it was dangerous, actually. Then after that, he ended up with a tractor which then had it’s own mower on the tractor. This would have been about ’39 probably when we got into some sort of mechanization.

Q: Was there electricity where you were?

A: We got electricity just prior to the 1938 hurricane and we lost it. I often thought about that. In fact, I told my wife, you know, I thought about my mother coming up from New York where she had all the amenities and coming up here with no electricity. Well, there was running water ‘cause there was a spring up on the hill where the water had been piped down; but no indoor plumbing other than the kitchen sink.
Q: The pump at the kitchen sink?

A: Well, no it was actually gravity. The pressure wasn’t the greatest but, yeah.

Q: So when electricity came in...

A: It must have come in about 1937 because we lost it very shortly thereafter. It took a long time to get it back because of the devastation from the 1938 hurricane. I mean, everything got blown down.

Q: What do you remember about the hurricane?

A: Well, I remember I was frightened. We had a big cellar door you go into it like a garage. Of course, there was no inkling as to what was happening other than all of a sudden the wind was getting stronger and stronger and it was an awful time getting those doors closed. Otherwise, I think the house would have probably gone over.

You know, it built up the pressure in the cellar of the home. I don’t know, I couldn’t have been oh, maybe I was ten, maybe ten years old. But yeah, I can still remember being in the cellar of that house with the wind howling.

Q: What were your neighbors like?

A: Well, let’s see. We had one neighbor who was another Norwegian family that came up from New York. In fact, the husband was related to my mother from Norway. He came from the same area in Norway. And then, we had a Polish family next, in back of us. They had a dairy... a little dairy farm. Then we had a Jewish family that lived up on the hill. He had chickens. Then we had another house that was owned by this Polish family and they would come and go. I mean, be there and then... nobody ever stayed there too long, it was a rental, until they could find something else. We had a big store there in the village. This is in Chaffeeville and of course. The place is completely different now than it was before they put the dam in. But there... an Erickson, he was a Swede who had a little candy store. Tey sold a few other things. His wife was a Yankee. I always remember her. She was a short thing, he was a tall thing. He was over six foot four or five and she was probably five feet. But when the flood control dam came in, these houses, these lower houses had to be sold and condemned. So that the village looks considerably different now than it ever did.

Q: Most of the work that was done by family members or were their any hired people that came?

A: No. We didn’t... we didn’t have any hired. In fact, neither did the neighbors.
The Jewish family that had the chicken farm did have a man that was up at the Mansfield State Training School. He came and lived with them and worked on the farm. He was up in years, come to think of it.

Q: So the things that were produced on your particular land were primarily for self-sufficiency?

A: Yeah, up until the dairy came in; until he began selling milk. You made your living doing something else and you made your food as much as you could on your own...on your own property. There were people came up from New York at that time with the same intention I think, of being able to...to harvest some of their products from the farm and help defray cost. I mean, hell things were hard at that time.

Q: How long had they been in New York; You may have said this earlier, I don’t remember but before they moved out of New York?

A: Well, they had been there I think, somewhere in the early ’20’s when they came over. They met over here, my mother and father, but they both came from Norway. So they were in New York for six, seven years at least, before they came up.

Q: Let’s go back to here, now. You’ve started planting here. What do you think some of the biggest changes have been for you or your particular plot of land?

A: Well, of course, I also do forestry work on...on...on the woodlot here. But I had several...well, two or three different timber sales. As far as the differences, the unfortunate part of all our land is, we are blessed with stones. You know, I look at some of these farmers who are able to plant trees and go in with mowers and not worry about hitting, just being able to just go right down one row and up the next row if you’re mowing. Our...our job is to periodically keep removing stones that are showing up or are being brought up so that we can get through with our mower a little better and save the wear and tear on the mower. As far as any changes are concerned, other than species changes...we were first growing white spruce and Scotch pine and the first crop of Scotch pine was very successful. We planted Scotch pine and found out the hard way that often the first crop of Scotch pine is very successful but the second one, you got all kinds of insect and disease problems. So we just finally went out of it, unless you wanted to spray and spray and spray and that began to be a losing proposition. White spruce was always the Christmas tree in Connecticut, earlier. The difficulty was that sometimes the tree would lose needles. ‘Still haven’t been able to figure out why exactly this happens. But because of that, we diversified into Douglas fir and Frasier fir and Balsam fir, something that has better needle retention. Right now we are going very...very heavily into Frazier firs and balsam firs and even getting away from Douglas fir. Again because of the disease. I don’t like to spray anymore than I have to. If I can spray a miscible oil against a chemical, which I think we’ll be able to do with Frazier firs to control most of the insect problem, then this is probably the way to go.
Q: What's miscible oil compared to a chemical?

A: It's like a wax. It's a by-product from the oil industry. What it does, is it just smothers. You have to put it on with a hydraulic spray. You can't use a mist blower and it literally smothers. You have to douse the tree real well and then it'll smother the insect and eggs. Time will tell if it's as effective as the entomologists say it will be.

Q: Did you notice any change in consumer...I'm thinking about when artificial trees came in, did you see any effect that this had?

A: Oh, yeah, yeah. They have been making some pretty nice looking artificial trees. The difficulty is, they been selling them from the standpoint of, you buy one tree, it'll last you a lifetime. The unfortunate part is the thing they don't say is that the chemicals that are in them can be very toxic...toxic if you get into a fire. And, they aren't biodegradable. At least all natural trees are biodegradable. Unfortunately I think there are people who think they're doing...they're doing the world a favor if they buy an artificial tree as against a natural tree because you don't cut a tree down, you know? I mean, people have just got to understand that Christmas tree growing is no different than corn growing or whatnot, it's a crop that you harvest and you replant...easier said than done though sometime. I would say the market for artificial trees now is probably about fifty per cent of the total tree market. But the National Association is trying to work on a little better communication as to the benefits of natural trees against the artificial trees; just more to dispel some of the myths about artificial trees. You can't knock something really. That's the worst thing you can do probably. You try to knock something and people are going to say, "Ah, they're just..." But you try to point out what you know are the benefits of one as against another. But, that's a big part of the market when you're talking about fifty per cent of the market is in artificial trees. There's always people who don't want...they want a little table tree. And, they don't want the fuss of going out and buying something when they'd rather just go to Ames or Caldor's, or whatever, and buy this little thing they can pull the branches out and set up and when Christmas is over put it away for another year. It does lack the naturalness of a real tree.

Q: Do you remember any particular kinds of insurance or banking situations that related to being a producer?

A: Well one of the difficulties was having liability insurance.
A lot of the earlier growers, myself included, would have a homeowner’s policy to cover our small plantation. Then the companies said...if you’re going to do this you’re going to have to get a farm policy. The Association, right now is in the process of coming up and working with Litchfield Mutual, working to come up with a policy for our Connecticut growers. There are policies through the National Association. There are farm policies...you can always buy insurance, whether you can afford it or not is something else. I guess maybe that’s the way to put it. They’re getting some of these down to a more realistic price. It’s working out pretty well now, I think, particularly if we can get with Litchfield Mutual. It’s come down to a fairly reasonable price of insurance. I talking about liability insurance ‘cause if you hire labor, yeah, you’re going to have to...you’re going to have to carry compensation insurance which is very high in this State.

Q: And if more people have “choose your own”, this is the other liability that...?

A: They’re liable, yeah. Exactly.

Q: The markets, you say, were down for you in the Southeast part of Connecticut. What about the rest of the Association? Talk about more about the Tree Growers Association.

A: All right. The Association was started in 1960. Up until that time, there had been well, a few people who were actually growing Christmas trees. After I started working at the nursery in 1951 say, we began to notice that we were shipping out more and more Christmas tree species whether it be White spruce, Norway spruce and to a limited degree, Douglas fir. So we ended up with a number of farms who all of a sudden had trees growing. Then the question was for some of us who were in this, either at the nursery or Service Foresters and Floyd Callward, from the University, the Extension Forester at that time, thought that if we were going to have an industry, we ought to have some kind of organization to be able to pass information back and forth or to one another, have meetings and so forth. So we ended up with a meeting. I guess it was Floyd that called the meeting of any interested growers to meet out in...hmmm, what the heck was his name? Ingalls’ Farm. Not Ralph Ingalls from Brooklyn but Ingalls over in East Hampton. He was one of those who had been growing and selling Christmas trees. It was at that time when everybody after a consensus was arrived at; yes, we ought to look at becoming an Association. I think the high point as far as membership was concerned was probably about eight...maybe seven or eight years ago when you had maybe up to four hundred people, members of our Association. There were more growers but everybody didn’t belong. Right now, our membership is about three hundred, three hundred and forty, something of that sort. I think we have more growers now. We had people who would plant trees and then figure they’d go back in ten years and make all sorts of profits. Well, as you know, if you know a little agriculture, that doesn’t happen.
You can sell something but they must be quality trees. So I think what we’ve gotten down to now is the people, members of our Association at least, who are bonafide growers who are looking at growing a quality product at a reasonable price. Getting back to the Association. We put out four newsletters a year. The May newsletter, which will be coming out this week or next week, will have a request of all our growers if they are interested in being listed in our choose-and-cut bulletin and our wholesale bulletin. Then I put this together and make this available to all the fairs and tourist stands... things throughout the State. Then I also have a mass mailing I put out for the wholesale trees available. Did you ever see our bulletin? You have seen it?

Q: Yes, I have... I have.

A: This has made for a pretty good organization. Are you familiar with the organization at all? All right. We have a President, a Vice-President, Secretary and a Treasurer. And then we have myself. I’m the only paid person as Executive Director. Then we have a Director for each County in the State, and, we have one At-large Director.

Q: So you’re a non-profit or you’re...? Okay.

A: Yeah, good point. Maybe you can... you can ask a question, I might be able to answer it better.

Q: Sure. Have... has the Association or yourself been responsible for any kind of policy relating to tree growing, the Christmas tree business, industry?

A: Policies as it related to legislation?

Q: To the legislation in relation to regulations.

A: We, yes, particularly, we have worked very closely with the fire marshal. This is a problem. Right now we’ve got a committee that was working. There’s a meeting coming up with the State Fire Marshals this fall. We’re hoping to be able to present something to all of these Fire Marshals because the tendency for them is to just ban Christmas trees period. Our argument is, “Christmas trees don’t start the fires, other things start the fires.” And actually there’s been... there’s been work done at the Experiment Station where you can’t get a tree to burn. Like, they have these things on TV and if you know what’s going on, it’s very obvious there’s an accelerant used to get this flaming going on. Oh, yeah. The... that’s really the sort of danger... the intent, I’m sure, is... is good. What they’re trying to tell people to be careful but when you notice that all of a sudden something flames up and then dies down again, you know damn well there’s an accelerant being used to... to get that thing to burn.
Then it goes out anyway and, you know, the thing has got to really be dry. But if people will follow the directions that we, as Association Members, try to impress on people about having all make a recut on the stem prior to putting it into your tree stand and having a good water supply in your tree stand, the tree doesn’t dry out. It really doesn’t. It may lose its needles even but the tree itself isn’t drying out. But it’s a physiological thing of the tree.

Q: What do they benefit by being members of the Association? They get other...?

A: They get the newsletters. They get four newsletters.

Q: Which is a ways of updating their information?

A: Yeah. We get either from local, and we work very closely with the Experiment Station. We find this has been very helpful to us.

Q: The one up in Windsor Locks:

A: Down at Hamden.

Q: Okay, oh.

A: The entomologists there and soils people. My argument with Nancy (Bull, UConn CANR) is that we don’t have any cooperation from the University as far as Extension people are concerned. We used to have it. Now, at the last when I saw Nancy, when the heck was it? Oh, at the conference.

Q: The Future Focus.

A: Yep, yep. She...she said...because I was complaining that the person who supposedly was the representative from the Extension Service never came to any of the meetings or once a year or something. So now we’ve got Tom Worthey...he’s going to be...I congratulated her. I said, “I think we finally got somebody to be of benefit to the Association and hopefully to the University too, from a standpoint of being able to have a little information passed back and forth.” But as far as what the benefits of for the members are, like I said, we got the four newsletters; we have twilight meetings in the summertime. Usually we’ve had as many as six or seven of them. We got to the point where it was too many from the standpoint of trying to get people from the Experiment Station to come. You couldn’t expect them...these were all night meetings. So what we’re doing now is we’re having three...three twilight meetings for the year. This is either in June or July, during the growing season where we’ll have one West of the river and one East of the river and then one at the Experiment Station in Windsor.
We have representatives from the Experiment Station and we’ll come to a grower and we’ll just see what that grower is doing. He’ll lead us around and there will be some discussion.

Q: So they volunteer for this?

A: Well oh, yeah. Yeah. And these are very informative because you really get an idea what other people are doing, how they’re doing it. You can find out when you don’t think they’re doing as well as you, hopefully, you know? Then we have our annual meeting which is in March. This is usually where we have some speakers that’ll come in from other universities. We’ve had guys from Penn. State...depending on what the program is for that particular year that we can come up with. And, of course, if we can afford to give...pay somebody to come in. That’s the trouble with getting some of these out-of-staters, you got to start paying for air transportation and then room and whatnot for at least one night. Then we have a fall field meeting. This is the big meeting for the end of fall. This year it’s going to be September eleventh down in Jones Street Farm in Shelton. That’s one of the bigger tree farms. In fact, this was probably one of the first Christmas tree farms in the State. They used to be a dairy farm. Have you...?

A: I haven’t, I’ll call him.

Q: Phil will be...Phil is the father and he would be a good one to...

A: Later. That’s all right.

Q: All right, yep. Because it’s rather interesting that I can remember when I first came to work for the department, this was back in ’51, the...they were raising Christmas trees then which, you know, was very, very unusual. Phil was very instrumental in helping the Association get started, too. But these fall field meetings, I think, have particular value because what we’re looking at is different times of the year to try to aim our program towards something that everybody should be looking at on their farms. Plus in the fall, you find out what mistakes you’ve made or haven’t made. Usually we have a pretty good turnout. On twilight meetings, we usually will get thirty or forty people out to each of the twilight meetings. Our fall meeting, often we’ll have between oh, we’ve had as many as a hundred and fifty people out for these. Then our annual meeting is usually...it’s somewhere over a hundred. We haven’t...we’ve been hitting lousy weather for our annual meeting with snow and or prediction of snow and all of a sudden, people get all excited when you talk snow.

Q: I want to go back to about the State nursery. The State has a nursery program and they use those to replant State lands or to provide trees for people to use on their own? I know you can get so many as a private person at sometime, too. Explain some of that.
A: Well, the State nursery originally was used strictly for reforestation of State lands and that was when...when it was out at say People's Forest. Then the laws were changed so that, in fact, you couldn't even raise your own seedlings. You had to buy in seedlings and then transplant.

Q: You mean the State? (Huh?) You couldn't buy them as...you couldn't raise them as a State...?

A: The State? No you couldn't...you couldn't raise them from seed. You had to buy-in transplants. Then you could transplant them and put them out at the State Forest. Then grad... (End of side one.) But then gradually...then finally...

Q: Why did that happen?

A: Well, I think it was political. I'm sure there was a nursery down in Clinton that used to be able to have the trees available. Finally the law was changed so that the State could start from seed. The State could also sell trees for reforestation. Christmas tree production was considered reforestation to private landowners but it was a case of them having to sell the trees for the cost of producing them. This is the way basically, I'm assuming it still is. I left eighteen years ago, now, but I'm sure it's...it's still the same. They've had different programs now where they've been trying to enhance the wildlife. I'm sure you're familiar with some of their...their pricelists. I guess they call them wildlife packages and they have homesteader packages. You can aim toward certain smaller landowners who weren't interested in planting two hundred and fifty white pine but were interested in planting a patch wildlife. Basically, most of us aim toward wildlife enhancement.

Q: Did you have any connection back...or any knowledge of the Civilian Conservation Corp and how that worked?

A: I was just a kid when that was going. I can remember camping up at that forest up there in Hampton and going to eat breakfast at the camp. But other than that... I'm...I'm familiar with it 'cause I had friends of the family who had been in that but nobody in my immediate family had been directly in the Corp. I know a neighbor of mine was. He had gone out to Colorado and worked there. I think it was six month assignments, but he re-upped and spent a year.

Q: Now this happened during the Depression?
Q: Have you noticed any difference in people related to coming back after World War II or after like, when veterans would come back? Have there been any changes in forestry, Christmas tree, agriculture that you could recognize as being part of the return of the people from military duty?

A: Well, the only thing I was, when you were talking about the military duty, I was thinking that it was a damned good thing that we had the CCC’s because I’m sure this had some terrific effect on the military ability of our people physically. You know, that because it was ..it was a work-oriented and yet it was sort of regimented, too. All the camps that I knew had an Army officer who was responsible for certain parts of it, the training. And then the Forestry people would be responsible for their on-the-ground...their on-the-ground operation. But as far as filling... think that we had...the people who came back after World War II probably had much more knowledge of this broad field of conservation than we probably ever would have had if we hadn’t had the CCC’s. But...it was just the wonderful training. But, you know, after the World War II they tried to have these camps, again. Only they tried to have it without the military and it was going to be a flop because you can’t have anything unless you have regimentation for something like this. I mean as far as I was concerned, that’s the reason these things were a flop. If you’re going to have something, you’ve got to have people who are responsible and people who are going to follow and if you weren’t going to follow, you’re going to be out. But you weren’t. I don’t know if you’ve ever done any studying of some of these things that they had. It was pathetic as far as I was concerned.

Q: What was it called? Do you remember?

A: Oh, it was a work...probably will think of it after you leave. Can’t think of it but they...the intent was there but...but, you know, the regimentation wasn’t there.

Q: What about the part-time people who like you have had other employment and you have your tree farm? Within the Association, what would be the break down between say the...the people who rely on this as their full livelihood and those who have alternatives?

A: As far as people who rely on it for their full livelihood, there are probably five...five farms in the State. Only one of them that I’m...Hartikka is probably the only one who’s doing it strictly on Christmas trees.
The other ones I’m thinking of is Dzen Farm over there in Windsor. And, what’s his name down here in Preston, Allyn Brown.

Q: Maple Lane.
A: Maple Lane, Allen, yeah. I’m trying to think of the other...but they’re all diversified. In other words, they’re not depending on one crop for their living. Allen, he’s getting a big orchard now, peaches and apples. Have you been there yet? You’ve been to his...you’ve seen his orchard?

Q: It was at Christmas.
A: Oh, okay.
Q: I saw them but...
A: But you could see his apples off there, apple trees on the wires. That’s rather interesting actually. But they don’t...most other growers like myself, I mean. I do...I...I still do some consulting forestry, too. We’ve had doctors, dentists. I guess some of it is just that...some like to...who knows the background of most of us. I think a lot of them probably...I think there’s a lot of the older people at least, who had an agricultural background; either brought up on farms or whatnot, went into their field whether it would be doctoring or business or whatnot but still wanted to keep their fingers in the...in the dirt so-to-say. It’s really perverse. I mean...I think almost any profession or any trade you can think of...we’ve probably had growers.

Q: Because where they live, they have the property and they...it’s their natural environment that they have around them and they (Yeah.) and they can also sell Christmas trees.
Q: And some of them take care of them better than others do?
A: Yeah, well I’m sure that’s true. Yeah.
Q: What about the new equipment and the new methods of pick-your-own? Years ago there were only one or two that I could find to go and pick your own and now there are more. Also, the equipment that they have to bundle a tree so that you can put it in your car. A lot of that has changed (Yeah.) in the last five years.
A: Yeah, yeah, mechanical. In fact, we finally bought a mechanical baler last year, my son and myself. Actually, if my son wasn’t in with me I wouldn’t be still doing some of this work because my back isn’t like it used to be to be able to do this.
Q: Now is he doing this...

A: He works for the Department of Agriculture.

Q: Okay.

A: The...oh, I was thinking... at first you didn’t have any baling that would be involved. I mean, you bought a tree and it was...you put it in your truck or the top of your car or whatnot. Then we became sophisticated. We began to have a baler that we pulled the tree through and there was a netting over it. I think you probably got that from Allyn with your tree. Then...then we found that the trees, they got a little bigger and a little hard to pull through so we put a little winch on there to help pull that tree through the baler. Then if you were wholesaling, in particular, you found that you were limited as to how many trees you can get on a load. So bigger farmers would then buy a baler which was a string baler. It would go around the tree, tighten it very tight and that would mean you could probably get twice as many trees on the truckload if they were going out. But also, you could use the baler here on your choose-and-cut operation because this meant it was easier. You got the tree baled up quickly. It was easier to help the...the buyer to put the tree in his vehicle or on top of his vehicle; and, parking oftentimes is a problem, you know, on these places. Most of us that have small operations, you like them to come, you like them to look in your gift shop, but you like them to get out, too, so there would be more parking. And this baler, mechanical baler, really made quite a difference from that standpoint. And it’s worked out. There’s all kinds of new equipment out. Whether or not you can afford some of it is something else.

Q: How expensive is some of it?

A: Well, a baler is close to ten thousand dollars so there’s a profit for a year probably. But the big thing is it saves your back more than anything else. They got mist blowers for some of the insect and disease controls where you can do this. We never had. If you have the road system you can do this. And they’ve got all kinds of smaller equipment for operating through small areas. They’ve got little tractors you can ride on and go right through and do your mowing and so forth if you don’t have stones like we do. We walk behind with our mower. But there’s all...yeah, there’s all kinds of new equipment that is available.

Q: How many women are involved in this?

A: Well, I would say any place that is raising Christmas trees...all the places that have women on their farms are involved with it. Now, if you’re talking about actually owning a farm per se? I mean, like myself, with Ann, I mean, my wife at Christmas time, she’s there helping depending on whatever has to be done.
So, basically we have a small gift shop that she takes care of...we...we give cocoa out to anybody who is interested. But if we need something else, she’s always available to help out. I’d have to say...well, yeah, I don’t know of any farm...I can’t think of any farm where the wife is not involved in that operation in one way or another. But women are indispensable. Let’s put it that way. How’s that with you?

Q: And the gift shops, as people are doing Christmas trees as a business or a side-business, whichever; there are more and more gift shops attached to them in some way, shape or form. These usually include what kinds of things?

A: Basically, like tree stands, ornaments, home crafts that...Ron, ‘cause he works for the Department of Agriculture, has been working...he works with these...these Fall agricultural groups that are making say, jellies, etc. He feels that he’d like to advertise for them so he has a display of that stuff in our shop. And people...a lot of people kind of look. They don’t always buy, but at least they are aware that there’s these commodity groups that are manufacturing all these different food items that are available in the State. But I got a chuckle out of it when he first did this. I said, “Good God Ron, we haven’t got enough room to put this in.” “Well, we’re going to make a little room for it.” So I ended up with another shed. That’s that little natural shed. We bought it two years ago just to...to build this place up a little better than what we had before.

Q: Has there been much international business?

A: Very little, very little. The Department of Agriculture has been working, trying to drum up some business. There is international business but not so much right here in Connecticut that I’m aware of that’s going out...out of the Country. North Carolina, a big producer of Frazier firs, I think they’re now selling. But my son who works with a marketing division, he’s been working with several States just trying to coordinate it. Because when you get into that...a lot of our growers could not handle say ten, twelve thousand trees. Ten to fifteen thousand Christmas trees is the type of thing you’d be getting into when you’re talking international trade. Most of our people, you know larger ones, are selling within the tri-state area in New York, New Jersey basically.

Q: And what kind of volume do you think might...?

A: That’s always a hard thing to...I’m in the process of trying to come up again with acreage and I feel this is the only close thing we can come to. If I can come up with a fair figure of acreage, then maybe I can extrapolate how many trees are being harvested. But it’s very difficult to get an honest answer on the number of trees sold.
No different than to get an honest answer from any farmer for what he’s producing. Right? I mean, how many vegetable growers that have these stands can give you a real good answer.

Q: Give you a ballpark of some kind, yeah.

A: Yeah, yeah. But that’s why the last figure that we have...I had extrapolated it based on acreage that I had gotten which I think was fairly close. And then I at the time, I had figured that probably eighty trees an acre was what you could harvest yearly. That may have been a little low but that’s because prior to that we’d never had any figures. The first thing people would think, you know, if you don’t have some sort of figure to give say to a legislator, you know, this is..."You people aren’t...you’re not business," you know? At least we were...but it would be interesting to see now what we end up with; if we end up with any differences. I’m hoping to do that this summer. I’ll try to. As people signed up for the new membership cards, I had them put in acreages that they have. I’ll have to make some phone calls but a lot of them have come up with, I think, pretty realistic figures as to what they have.

Q: What do you think was one of the bigger problems you had to address?

A: As far as Christmas tree growing?

Q: Um hmm. Either personally or within the Association. We might do both of them.

A: Well, I think the biggest problem was when we had those scotch pines. When we were growing and all of a sudden you find out that Scotch pine...we were having so many problems with Scotch pine that the course of trying to control these things was going to make you a deficit rather than any profit. Trying to keep up with people’s likes and dislikes too. Right now, people are asking for Frazier firs. Well, lots of times...lots of times a lot of those growers don’t have Frazier firs or just have Frazier firs coming along. Any marketing is trying to keep up with what the market is looking for.

Q: How are...are people coming to new decisions about what to use?

A: What they like is number one from your owners of the tree. And then also, I think, where there’s no needle drop at all.

Q: Well, I was told this last year but if they hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t have switched trees. When I told them I needed it up for a month, they said, “Well, you’re going to want to consider this or this.”
A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And maybe that's what more people are doing.

A: Yeah, that's what I think too. Yeah, basically. And then you get some people who will want a particular tree and that's it. I mean, if they want a White Spruce, they want a White Spruce. The advantage to white spruce is that the branches are stiff. It'll hold heavier ornaments and this type of thing. The same thing with, say a Blue Spruce or Colorado Spruce. So we have the likes and dislikes. Then I find, too, that we have people who they think they know what they are buying and I try...I remember one in particular. I tried to tell him that he...you know, you've got a white spruce. "Oh no. I got a fir." I didn't argue with the person, I mean. I figure if he thought he knew better than me what tree he was buying, I wasn't going to argue with him.

Q: So, how many different kinds do you have out there?

A: We have Fraser fir, balsam fir, Douglas fir and now White pine, White spruce and Blue Colorado spruce. It's quite a mixture.

Q: And for most people, you buy one a year so you don't remember from year to year.

A: That's right, yeah. The only one that people do remember though is a Colorado blue spruce because of the sharp needles.

Q: What do you think has given you the most satisfaction in your career?

A: Well, my career as far as in the Christmas trees or in Forestry? I think working with private landowners was always...I think just meeting people. Would you say that again...the satisfaction of...? I think Christmas time. There's just meeting the people. and particularly when you have...We always get a chuckle out of ones coming in with little children who are going to cut their own tree and of course, the kids want that tree, right? Of this size. The parents will say, "Oh, we have to have a little bigger tree than that." But no, I think just people. People are nice really all around. Well there are a few stinkpots I guess, but basically it's working with people and people appreciate it if you give them the service that, you know, that they're looking for.

Q: Do you have more people coming out now to cut their own?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think last year was probably the best year we ever had as far as this is concerned because we didn't have any snow or rain like we've had in past years. I mean, some years people say how romantic it is to come out and get a Christmas tree right in the snow.
But it’s amazing, there aren’t a lot of people that come out to do it. They’ll wait until the snow goes a little bit or...well there’s always a diehard that’ll, “Oh, this is fun traipsing through the snow.” But unfortunately if you get a heavy snow it’ll get the branches hanging. They look awful. We’ve actually gone through and shaken trees to get the snow off so people would see what they were buying.

Q: Do you have any idea from what distance people come to...to cut their trees?
A: Well, the majority...we get a lot of people from Rhode Island, of course we’re right up against Rhode Island here. But we’ve had them from down in Clinton.

Q: They have the directories so people can find you, or people word of mouth?
A: Oh, it would be a directory. You say you had seen our choose-and-cut listing. Yeah. And we only advertise in that. Now everybody doesn’t advertise 'cause a number of people think that they don’t have enough trees, they don’t want to advertise, they already have their customers. But oh, we’ve had people that have come up here to visit friends in Voluntown from New York. Then on the way back they’ll pick up a tree and take back with them. My daughter from Maine always takes back a tree with her when she comes. The majority of the people though, that we get, are from Norwich/New London...along the Southeast part of the State here.

Q: Has...has the traffic from the casino brought any different kind of...?
A: I can’t say. There’s been a lot of development going on up along Route 49 and I noticed we picked up a lot of customers, I think from that. I don’t like signs if we can help it...until maybe October we’ll put up our Christmas tree farm sign but I can’t say that the casino traffic has helped. We’ve thought about that too but never could know. What I’ve had is the people who have traveled from Rhode Island sometimes that are coming up Route 49. We’ve had people say that they were going to work somewhere up North and they would see our sign or would see the plantation in the summertime. We got customers that way. But I can’t say...this isn’t the main traffic for the casino. You see, most of it would be coming down 395 and Route 12.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add about...oh, oh. I wanted to ask, how many children do you have?
A: Three. (Okay.) Yep, we have...one is a nurse, one works for an insurance company and my son, my son works with the Department of Agriculture.
Q: Anything else you’d like to add?

A: No, I can’t think of anything. We’ve had sort of a meandering conversation here.

Q: Yes, we have, haven’t we? Did you have any connection, with the Farm Bureau or the Grange? Are there associations like that?

A: Well, I worked with the Farm Bureau because I’ve been a representative to the Governor’s Council from the Christmas Tree Growers and, of course, the Farm Bureau is represented on that. And then also from the CAIC, the Connecticut Agricultural Information Council. And then we belong...as an Association we belong to the Farm Bureau. I belong to the Forest and Park Association which I think any Forester who works in the State of Connecticut should belong to.

Q: Were you or your son or daughters ever in 4-H?

A: No, we didn’t have any 4-H down here when they were young. My daughter, the oldest daughter, she’s the one who’s been making the wreaths for us at Christmas time. She’s been doing that since she was in grammar school. It’s with a little more mechanization now then there used to be, before all was wired by hand.

Q: There’s a form now I think.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. A form. Then there’s a table with the wires that will come down and hold it so you don’t have to do this to it. Just stomp your foot and things come down. We just bought a new one for her actually to try to increase her production.

Q: What is the greatest change that...that you’ve adjusted to personally?

A: The greatest change? Geez, I really can’t say that I had to adjust to any particular change. When I retired, I retired basically so I could get back out into the forest, again, do forestry work as against sitting behind a desk. I thought if I was going to do this I’d better do it while I can still walk. So I took an early retirement from the department. Oh, I can’t...I’ve just gone with the tide. I guess as time goes on you...you go with the times.

Q: Do you have any vision of what the...the Association and Christmas trees might be in the future?

A: I think the Association or Christmas Tree Growers are in for, I think, a good future. I really do.
And I think that, in turn, is going to affect the Association because I think the members that we have in our Association are the members who are interested in working together with other people. It bothers me sometimes to think that we have growers who for whatever the reason don’t...won’t belong to the Association. My argument with anybody who talks about this is, “By golly, it’s numbers that count,” when you talk to legislators, when you talk to Governor. It really is, whether you like it or not. If you can say you’re an organization of five hundred growers in the State, it’s going to mean a heck of a lot more than we’re an organization of one hundred growers. You know, it’s...it’s a numbers game, particularly as far as politics is concerned. But I do think that as we progress as far as an Association and growers, we’ve become much more proficient and I think, much more efficient too as far as the growing of trees, the quality of trees. I think the quality of trees that we’re growing now is much, much better than it was twenty years ago. No question of that.

Q: That they pruned and maintained the ---.

A: Yeah, yeah. And there’s always experimental work going on and growers are trying different things out as far as species. We notice now that there’s a lot of demand for large trees with these cathedral ceilings. Well, I don’t particularly care to get involved with that because there’s an awful lot of labor involved in keeping these trees sheared. Then if you start to charge the price that you should get for that type of a tree, then people have a tendency...well at least the customers that I have don’t want to pay that kind of money. Well then, you know, if you can find what you’re looking for here, fine. Otherwise I’ll send them to say, Hartikkas if they’ve got big trees or anybody else who might have larger trees. I don’t want to get involved with big trees. It’s just too much work. You’ve got to get fifty, sixty, seventy dollars for the trees, that’s twelve to fourteen foot trees, because of the size of them. The handling of them and so forth...one person no longer can cut that tree down and put it through a baler.

Q: You mentioned prices. How have prices for an eight or ten foot tree fluctuated over the years?

A: Well, there...we have some eight foot, ten foot trees but we let them go for the same price. We charge twenty-three dollars and then if people want baling, we charge ‘em two dollars for baling. So it’s twenty-five dollars. Sometimes if a tree gets over eight feet, some of the farmers will go by the foot, six or seven dollars a foot or something of this sort. Everybody has their own pricing. It’s always interesting to hear how other people are pricing their trees.

Q: Have the prices changes a lot in the last ten years?
A: Actually not that greatly. They’ve been pretty stable and of course, one of the reasons it’s been stable is that competition’s been there. There’s been a lot of trees available. I think I’m not charging half enough for the trees. When you start selling a tree for fifteen dollars, and assuming you’ve maintained the plantation, you know darned well that none of us get paid very much for our labor anyway. But when you’re only charging fifteen dollars for a tree, you’re not getting paid much for depreciation of your equipment and whatnot either, as far as I’m concerned. But prices have been staying pretty stable. I think down in Fairfield County, the prices are usually ten to fifteen dollars more than they are—here in the East. We got a lot of growers here in New London County...

Q: Are there many growers in Rhode Island?

A: No, not a lot. Now Arnold Hartikka, the Hartikka Tree Farm, they do a lot of advertising in Rhode Island. So they get a lot of their people for the choose-and-cutters are from Rhode Island.

Q: And they also wholesale them. Maybe they wholesale them.

A: And...yeah.

Q: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time. We covered a lot in both area.

A: Well, okay, it’s been nice talking to you.

Q: This has been an interview with John Olsen. Thank you.