

Oral History with Whit Hicks and Peggy Sadler. Part 1. Recorded in 1979

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When did you or when did your family first come here? Well, we used to come up here way back in 1917, I think. My uncle used to live in Canada and he bought this place where the farm up there in Turnpike. So, we used to always go up to Canada for vacations in the summer to help them hay, you know.

So, when we moved down here, why, we, would I say 17? No, it must have been 17, yeah. And then when, we used to help them hay up here, but we thought it was a great thing to come to the country, you know. And you were coming from? Boston.

Right in Boston. Yeah, we lived out in the suburbs of Boston, at Roslindale. Uh-huh.

So, then, when it happened, I thought I'd always like to spend a winter up here. So, I, of course, when we were up here summers, I used to chum around with Andy Thorpe and he was my, in fact, he's just two months and two days younger than I. And he, we used to go to dances and chum around. At that time, he and Archie Thorpe owned the farm.

That's the big farm. The big farm up where your mother was. Right, right.

So, they said they could use some help. So, gosh, I was getting sick of the city, so I made arrangements to come up and work with them for a whole year. And how old were you then about? Well, I should judge, I was probably about, let's see, well, I was high school.

I must have been around 21, 21, 22. But I had quite an experience up there with them. They had a big herd of cattle and done all the farm chores with them.

And we cut wood in the wintertime, you know, and sold it. Just for fun, how much, do you remember how much you sold a quart of wood for them? Oh, probably \$7. And that was cut and spilled all over? Yeah, that was, we'd cut it in four-foot lengths from up in the woods and then bring it down with the horses or tractor.

Well, we didn't use tractors very much then, but they had an old Fordson tractor. We'd pile it up in the wintertime, and then before the winter was over, we'd cut it up with a saw, you know, one of those circular saws. And everybody wanted it while we sold it.

They used to sell quite a lot, probably 50, 60 quarts of wood. And, yeah, I should say probably it might have been cheaper than that. But \$7 was a good price for a quart of wood then.

And what year was this about? Well, that was in 1929, I should say, 1929. And you spent a year here then? One year, and from probably September until I think June or July. Then I decided I'd go back to the, well, I used to come back and stayed with my uncle on the farm for, oh, three or four months.

And then I went to the city because there wasn't that much work around the farm then in the wintertime, you know. So I went back to the city, but there was no work there. And then my brother-in-law had a chicken farm up in Hopkins, New Hampshire.

So I went up to, he'd get sick, had the flu or something, and called up and wanted to know if I'd come up because he'd read in the process of hatching chickens then, and read in the house. They had moved in, but they didn't have any furniture there. They had moved from the city up there.

So he, we were up and he had the brooder of chickens right in the living room, you know. There was no furniture in there, but, so he and I, we slept in one room, and then we'd get up in the middle of the night, you know, to turn the eggs when it was getting close to hatching season. So I stayed there with him until 1931 when my uncle had an accident up here and fell off the roof and never come to, you know.

So I stayed with my aunt there and run the farm with her until they only had six or seven cows, but that wasn't very much. So in the meantime, I got acquainted with Leon Mell, you know. So in about August, I think, he'd come up and ask me if I was interested in working in the store.

And I said, gee, I hadn't thought of it. I'd never done any store work at all. I worked in a machine shop down in the city.

So I said, yes, but I can't do it now, I said, because there's, like, fall plowing to do here. Well, he says, when you get around to it, why don't you come down and see me? So I did, and I went down and I started to work in the store in November 1932. Isn't that something? Yeah.

And who was in the store then? Leon Mell was running it at that point? Leon Mell was running it, yes. And his, I think his mother was working there at the time, too. But I think Leon really had the say of it, you know.

She was just working with him. And there was a fellow by the name of Harry McEwan. I took Fred Amell's place.

Fred Amell was getting through, you know, and so I took his place. So there was actually just the three of us working there at that time. But a year later, Dan Fraser came to work with us.

He was out of high school, you know, and he worked about a year. Then he thought he'd like to go bricklaying with his folks. They're all bricklayers, you know.

But he didn't care for that, I guess, after about a year at that. And so he come back to the store with us. So he and I were the clerks in the store for quite a period of time.

And, well, until, well, we worked there continuously until 1955 when Leon decided that he would like to get out of it, retire, and asked us if we were interested in taking it over, which, of course, was quite a big decision for us. That was in 1955? 1955, yeah. That is, probably this occurred in 1954, but we actually decided to take it over and it occurred in 1955.

It was January 1955 when you did take it over. Is that what you said? And so from then on, we decided to call it Dan & Wits. Nobody ever noticed by our last name anyway, and so it was either Mr. Dan or Mr. Wit.

Right, right. And somebody would say, well, I think Mr. Hicks or something. Well, who's that? Right.

You know what I'm saying? So we had a wonderful partnership there. And, of course, we operated at first on a shoestring. We didn't know whether we were going to make a go of it or not.

Fortunately, the people were very good with us and stayed with us and we developed quite an emporium, as everybody calls it now. Right. So we, yeah, and then, of course, we were going to, we both planned to get rid of it, you know, because I wanted to retire and I think Dan thought he would like to, but he didn't think he would have anything to do if he did retire.

Of course, I, at that time, was on a farm and I could fool around with the land, you know, like that. But his boys coming home from the service, both Jack and George at that time, I guess talked it over and so Dan asked if I would be, how I'd feel if he brought me out. And I thought that was a wonderful thing to do.

I said I'd be happy to, you know, have him. So that was the way the arrangements were made. And, of course, we parted on very good friends.

There's no, we never had any arguments at all. Great. That's amazing for that.

Well, that's the period of, and that occurred in 1973. January 1st is when we parted the partnership. But you've been in the store since then.

Oh, yes, yeah. Well, that's when we took it over. Dan was afraid he couldn't handle it himself.

That was before he decided the boys were interested. So I said, well, if it would help you, I'd be glad to extend my, I'd be glad to work for him for whatever period of time he needed until his boys were ready to take over. So that made him feel quite a little better, I believe.

And so I did. I worked, not as strenuously as we had been working. He says, I know you don't want to work full time.

I know, but so we, for whatever reason, I worked during the day and no night work and Sundays. I didn't work Sundays. So that worked very good.

In fact, I had been going in a few hours in the morning to help Jack out with mocking off out in the back room. You mean even now? Well, yeah, up until last week. I did decide that it's about time.

I had so much work here at home getting ready to move that I thought probably I should relinquish that part of it down there. So in the meantime, they had got another Bob White come in, you know, to work for them. And so that was going to take the strain off there.

But I did go back the last three weeks, mornings, because Bob had gone away for a period of time and just so it wouldn't gang up on him, Jack asked me to. But I think probably we've got

to, under the situation, packing and everything, getting ready to move, we've got to take the time here. Right, right.

When you started with Merrill's, how many employees were there? Just three. Just three. And how many employees are there now? Oh, I wouldn't dare say.

I should almost think it would drive Dan crazy to keep track of them. There used to be just three cards. But when Dan and I took it over, we decided to get a time clock because there were so many different ones coming and going you couldn't keep track of them.

So they punched in and out just like they would at a factory, really. I don't know, at one time they told me they had about, it seems there was 23 different people at that time. Of course, restrictions and everything with the law come that you couldn't work a person over so many hours, you know, and everything like that.

And when I was there, we went to work at 7 o'clock in the morning and we went home whenever we got through with our delivery trip or something, you know, when we used to deliver groceries. And that sometimes was 7 o'clock at night, sometimes before a holiday it might be 8.30. Wow. But of course they had the post office too there at that time.

Oh, I see. Let's go back to when you first started at Dan and Wits. You said the post office was there.

Where was the post office actually situated? Where was it physically? Well, actually it was, Rob Olds had it when I first went to work in the store. That store was divided in half, which you'll notice there's a big section down there. Robert Olds had the dry goods side and the grocery store was on the left side of it without the new addition, the new entrance and so forth.

Right, right. So after, well, Robert Olds had the post about two years probably while I was there, but then he relinquished the post office and Leon was appointed postmaster. So then Rob moved out because I think he was renting from the Merrill's then at the time.

And Robert moved out and Leon opened an alcove in there or an atway and we took over the dry goods side, Merrill did, and we moved there. Well, the post office at first was right there where, just to the left of where the telephone is. Okay.

Right along through there. Herbie Loring worked with us as postal clerk. That's right too, Herbie Loring was there as the postal clerk.

And that's the Loring that lived here? That's right. In Cliff Street. Right.

And he was going at the time, he was a part-time worker because he was going to Dartmouth College at the time, I think part-time. And then Leon decided to broaden out so they moved the post office over where the office is now, I believe, along that line there so it made a better access to it. They could come in through the dry goods door, you know.

And had it there until he, of course the administration changed and I think the McKenna's got the post office with the administration. The funny part was that it didn't change until the

changing period was about the last year of the administration. Of course Leon, I believe, being a Republican, he had it during the Republican administration.

That's the way the post office has changed then. Then when the post office come up for transferring, it come up in the papers and of course they took examinations. While we went down, I think Cuning Johnson took the examination, I took the examination, and Dave Sweat, I believe, was working with us at the time.

Yes, Dave come over to work with us. And we went down to White River and took the postal examination. But I was at that time living in Lewiston when we were first married.

And Cuning, we all got good marks on it because, and I don't know what possibly there might have been, I don't know how it happened, but I had to go for a second interview because they couldn't understand why I was living in Lewiston, which was a suburb of Norwich, lived right beside the post office. See, the post office, Lewiston post office was right beside where we were living. And why I considered Norwich my post office when Lewiston was right beside the, and I tried to explain it to them that that was a suburb and I was working up in the post office too and so I got my mail there.

But that didn't seem to phase it. And of course Helen McKenna took the exam too. But I suppose being a Democratic party, why she got the thing for the preference.

And there was nobody there that had any, like sometimes if you're a veteran you get an extra five points allowance, you see, and none of us were veterans, so that didn't pan out. But anyway, the McKennas were appointed post mistress, she was at that time. And then, is that when it moved to Tracy Hall? No, I think the first transfer of the post office was up to right where we're sitting here.

That's right, that's right, I remember. There was a little shack right here. And Loyal Labor owned it.

And I don't know whether he owned it then or not. I'm not sure about the Hazens, I'm not sure at the time, but anyway. I think you're right, I think the Hazens did own it.

The Hazens owned it, I believe. And McKennas fixed up the post office in there and that was it. Until they moved from there, I believe, to where the original, no, that's right too, they moved to Tracy Hall when they got Tracy Hall built in, was it 37? Let's see, I wouldn't remember that.

So Tracy Hall, it must have been in Tracy Hall before it came here, because I remember it being here and I remember it being in Tracy. Or did they bring it back here at some point? No, I don't think they brought it because they moved from there, the parsonage where the original post office is now. It used to be the Congregational Parsonage was there and they had it in there for quite some time.

Then I thought they moved from there to Tracy Hall and then probably that might have been while they were building that post office. You don't remember it being in Tracy Hall? I remember it being in Tracy Hall. You do? In order to have me remember it, it would have to have been after 43 or 45.

It's funny how it leaves you like that, but anyway, it was either there or here and I think they moved from here to Tracy Hall in where the police office is now. Yes, I remember it being in there. They had it there and then I think that was while they moved the parsonage over on back that the hotel I believe owns now or the inn owns and then they built the government post office there and of course when that was ready they moved into it.

I'm a little unclear about a couple of things. You were living with your uncle and then with your aunt and that's the farm that you eventually lived on. That's right.

In between, how did it work? You went from living there and working in the store. When did you meet Mrs. Hickson? How did that work out? Well, I went to work in 32. And you were still living out there at the farm? Yeah.

When were we married? We were married in 34. 34? We were dating before you went to go to the store. We only got together before you decided to go to the store.

Apparently I met her while I was in the store or previous to the store business and then we were married in 34 and so then first we lived in Lawson, you see, and there in the Atholosis Tenement on the other side of the Ledger Bridge and then we stayed there, well I don't know how many years, but then we moved up to the, from there up to the, where Irving Goodrich lives now, right on the corner of Woody Hill. Oh, right. And it was called the old Hebert House then.

Hebert. Hebert. Mrs. Hebert owned it.

And from there we moved down over the apartment that Alice Brady lived in up over the Gardner Insurance Agency. There was two apartments up there. Dave Sweat lived in one apartment when he got married and we lived in the other one.

So while we were there, while we bought the, purchased the seven acres up on Woody Hill, which the monks own, a paperman named a monk owns it now, and we built a little bungalow up there, 18 by 28. It's not the little gray one, is it? Up on the hill? Where the monks live. Where the monks lives? Oh, no, okay.

It's a, well you, did you live up there? No. On the right as you go up through? No. There's a little gray one, I think Ed Butler built.

That's what I was thinking. Yeah, well you go a little bit beyond it and there's a driveway that goes to the left up there. That was, everybody thought we were crazy.

To build so far up? Build up to the hill. Yeah. How in the world do you get there in the wintertime? Right.

Look at it now, huh? Yeah. Oh, Jeffrey Pennock. I don't know if you remember Jeffrey Pennock.

I remember the name, yeah. He was quite an old codger from, lived on Church Street there where the Reeds live now. Uh-huh.

When he found out that we were building up there, he came in and he named it. He says, how's everything up in Owl's Peak? Uh-huh. And he, so that name stuck with it, you know, for a long while.

Uh-huh. But we never, we had trouble getting there, but I had an old Model A Ford and put chains on, you know. Sometimes in the wintertime I'd have to put a bag of grain on each of the bumperettes, you know.

Oh, wow. Tie them on so as to get weight. Uh-huh, uh-huh.

But that was exciting up there. We had, it was a beautiful view at that time up there, too. About what years were you living up there, about? Well, we went up there in what, thirty-four, about thirty-eight.

I should say roughly about thirty-eight. And I don't know how long we were there before we moved over, from there over onto the farm to stay. Because, oh, I missed it.

You lived eight years up there. Up on Owl's Peak, eight years up on Owl's Peak. You moved up this time.

The valley was a year old. That's right, it was in the wintertime when we transferred. Oh, wow.

You weren't afraid of anything. No. But Frank Gauthier had been living on the farm at that time, from the time we got married.

See, Frank was a relative of my uncle. Edna. Edna.

Edna was a relative. Oh, that's right, too. Edna was a relative of my uncle.

My side of the family was a relative of Mrs. Rowell. So they moved off the farm and so we went up there to be with her, you see, and like that. So then we were up there for quite some time before Mrs. Rowell died.

Yeah, so then that's when we took her after she passed away. So then, of course, we were up there for, well, quite some time until we come over here. We thought it was getting pretty much to, we couldn't take care of the farm, you know, and didn't do any farming.

We raised some beef cattle for a while and then we thought it was, well, I don't know, as we had very much thought about moving to the extent until we found this place here. Come down through, we always admired this house that Mrs. Perry had built and had been in it two or three different times when she was living here. And I thought, well, then all of a sudden there was a sign up here for sale.

And so we come down inquiring about it. So the more we inquired, the better we liked it. So we made arrangements about purchasing this and then put the farm up for sale, thinking that, well, we'll move downtown, make it easier for us.

So fortunately, Dr. John Lyons come along and was very much interested and he snapped it right up. And when did you actually move here? It was six years ago this coming October, 1973. And we've been here six years.

Wow. Seventy-three, yeah. Seventy-three, yeah.

Wow. I can't believe it's been six years since you've been down here. I know.

It's unbelievable to us. That's really remarkable. You had done all your schooling then before you came here, so you're not acquainted with the Norwich schools from your own standpoint.

No. But you had, what, four children that went through the Norwich schools? I had four children. All my schooling was done in Boston.

See, I graduated from Hyde Park High School out there in Boston. So I went to night school. I went to Wentworth Institute nights while I was in Boston after high school, studying the electricity and so forth.

And when I came up here, of course, I lost all acquaintance. No, I was, didn't get any, the only connections I had with the school, I was on the school board for three years down here. What years were those? Oh, gee, I don't know if I could tell you.

Well, I could tell you closely. It was, it must have been, I think it was a year before we took over the store, and two years after, so it must have been 54 to 57. So you were on the school board just before the beginning of the Dresden.

During the time when they were considering going, joining up with Dresden. Uh-huh. Because we were over, John Fraser, Cecilia Lewis, and I were on the school board.

John Fraser was that, you don't mean, Opa? Opa. Oh. He was a member of the school board for years, you know.

Oh, no, I didn't know that. Yeah, and we would go over, have a meeting with the Hanover school board and so forth and talk it over with them, and there was consideration of going down with White River to see if White River would take us. Uh-huh.

At that time, White River was considering they would like to have us down there. They were considering building what they called probably a middle school down close to where Star Lake Billings was, be in the town of Hartford, but it would be pretty close for both towns. But I guess the final vote come of the town was that we would join up with the Dresden school district over there.

Uh-huh. That is, with Hanover, and that's when they called it the Dresden school district. I think I'm right in saying that.

But when my term expired, well, I had to get out of it because there couldn't, too much confliction with business, you know. People call up in the middle of the day and say, well, so-and-so treated my child kind of badly, you know, and so forth. And they knew where to get ahold of you.

Yeah, it was too handy. Yeah. And then at that time, of course, the school board, there wasn't that much pressure on the school board as it is now.

We used to meet probably once a month, but now I guess it's every, and then when they started in with the building of the combining of the two towns, it got so that, gosh, I guess they were meeting two or three times a week. Oh, yeah. Having to meet for Dresden and having to meet for Norwich itself.

Yeah. Yeah, that's a lot. It was amazing because of the experience.

At the time that we were in, of course, our children were going to Hanover at the time, but You must have had some in both schools, didn't you? Well, let's see. They had some in Hanover. No, I mean, you had four children during those years.

Oh, yes. In the mid-50s, you must have had two over here.

We lost 30 seconds of transcription.