

**“Green Mountain Chronicles”
Oral History Transcriptions, 1981-1989 (bulk: 1987-1988)
MSA 199 & 200**

Introduction

This transcription is one of approximately 42 transcriptions of interviews with individuals conducted primarily in 1987 and 1988 in preparation for a radio program sponsored by the Vermont Historical Society entitled “Green Mountain Chronicles.”

**Greg Belcher
Part 2**

money to spend because they raised so much at home. Of course I have heard the old people that are all gone now tell about when they. My old friend Merlin Slayton told me about when maple sugar got to be as expensive as white sugar. They always used maple sugar and kept a little white sugar for when the minister came. But when I was a child there was nobody around here but what had a 10 lb. pail of maple sugar in the kitchen and they used that for any sweetening. Cakes, cookies, beans, maple sugar beans. It was really worth while eating.

MG Can you recall noticing change coming into this community?

GB Oh yes, when a farm would burn down, it wouldn't be built up. When automobiles came in and people started going out to work, they changed from a raising a half of what they needed for their daily lives, at least a half, to using money to buy it downtown. And as a result, the store folded. Let me show you a picture of what the store was in Maple Corner when I was a boy. I can go this way and you won't have to. Now you have seen the store in Maple Corner where you go.

MG Yes.

GB This is what it was like.

MG Why don't you sit down and tell me about it while you show me the picture and tell me about it.

GB Here is the building I told you about, a 2 1/2 story house. They had a millinery shop upstairs and this is the office and the Post Office end of it. This was drawn by an uncle of mine sitting on the steps of the house right across from there. There was a shingle mill up there. They sold everything in that store that you can imagine. Womens clothing, mens clothing, drugs and what not. It was a great gathering place. The present store stands about here away from that. The carriage shed is over here for cold weather. An ice house where they put up ice. That was until it burned down, well I can't remember what year it burned down, sometime before 1920 I guess. No it couldn't have been. It is later than that. Alden told us the other day when it was.

MG Before it burned down, did it stop being such an open store.

GB Well it was beginning to run down because Elgin sold it. That was one reason that it run down. The Co-op bought it and it burned down while the Co-op owned it. I wish I could remember the year, but I can't, but I can't remember what year it was

that it burned down. But it was very successful because there was such a big population that relied on it on this side of Montpelier. Well I am pretty near running out here.

MG The tape is through on this side, so let me turn it over

GB Marion, Evelyn was maybe 18 or so and that would be in the 1940's.

?? We were about 18 in the 1940's weren't we? I think it was, was it during the war?

GB Aldin, my son has a tremendous memory for things.

?? ???, they built the road.

GB I think it was after World War I.

?? Oh yes.

GB You weren't born, were you.

?? Even after World War II

MG Were there other families that came up just in the summertime also?

GB Yes, there were a few. There were not too many. Some people took summer boarders, not too many. The big house up on the hill, beside the other side of the pond where Patrick Henry lives now, that was owned by the Bancroft family and they took summer borders. There were several places around where people came. There weren't many that had their own place up here. They came and boarded and maybe stayed two weeks or two months.

MG You said that going to Montpelier was a big trip before the automobile came, what about Barre, Burlington. Did people ever go to those places?

GB Well I will tell you a story about that now. My wife's uncle and her father had to go over to Hinesburg to settle an aunt's estate over there. One of them took his horse and picked up the other one. One lived over on the Converse Road and one lived in Maple Corner. Haram came over and picked up Burt and drove down to Montpelier, put the horse up at the livery stable and got on the train, went to Richmond, went to the livery stable and got a horse and drove out to wherever it was. The aunt lived out there in Hinesburg, I think it was. They were gone two or three days. We would go over there in one afternoon.

Then Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Albert drove up by the house on the start of their honeymoon in Albert's new buggy. They headed off into their married life in horse and buggy. Then it was the only way to go. You went so far by horse and then you took the train.

MG So after the automobiles came in, it affected peoples shopping and they would go to bigger places to shop, what about the industry and other business that were in this area?

GB There were quite a few little industries here. I don't know about many of them except by what I have been told. There was a jackknife blade factory just across the brook, right here where you saw the metal fence now. They made jackknife blades there. There was I don't know how many sawmills. Everywhere you go in the woods fishing you come on a dam and here was another mill you know. Some of them were thunderstorm mills that ran after a good storm and some had a steady supply of water. Burt Converse and Elgin Mann used to get into frequent discussions. Accromonious sometimes because Elgin would want to run his shingle machine and Burt would object to it because it meant that he would be holding back the water to get enough water to run the shingle machine. He owned the water right of the mill at the dam there. Burt didn't like to have that area flooded because he had cut hay there, so it made for a little hard feeling every now and again. On this side of town, there was the creamery of course. That was the big business here. Incidentally, it was a carriage factory before it was a creamery. Rome Barnardum painted wheels in there. He put that little thin gold stripe down the spoke. I don't remember the shingle mill. The jackknife blade mill, Rome told me that was there. Of course, over in East Calais you had the feed store and the mill and the furniture factory over there. That burned down in World War II thereabouts. The little industries had pretty well run out. I should tell you something about North Calais where my wife's uncle Isaac Tabor lived and ran the store. He was school director, justice of the peace. Well, he was the main stem of history there. You should have talked to him. He had been dead for 50 years. He had a lot of knowledge about the country and the people and a tremendous memory. I never met a man like him. A simple example. He subscribed to the National Geographic when it first came out. He read every word of it and he remembered everything. He knew more about the geography and people of the world than you and I put together will ever know. It was just a tremendous source of knowledge. He hadn't travelled very much, but he was friendly with the Kate's. Of course, he was friends with everybody. Mr. Kate, Sr., Weston Kate's father was the minister of a church in Auburn, Maine. The family had cottages on Nelson Pond for a long time. He used to come over here in the summer for vacation. He came down

to the North Calais store one time and said Isaac, "I have got to go over to Auburn for a funeral, would you like to go with me? You said you have never been to Maine." Isaac hadn't been out of the State of Vermont very many times I can tell you if ever. Isaac said yes, he guessed he could. He would like to go with him. It just happened that my wife and I came over from Maine to see him shortly after he got back. I said Uncle Ike, how did you like the country over there? Well Gregory he said I will tell you. After we crossed the Connecticut River, I never saw an acre of land that worth \$.09. No he says that is not quite true. There were two or three good farms right along the Connecticut River. He was a marvelous man. He knew the age, birthdate of every child that went to school while he was director. It was unbelievable. I saw that tested one day. He called a man on the age of one of his daughters, then reminded him that today was her birthday. He said I guess I better get something and take it home to her hadn't I.

MG So North Calais in particular of all the villages in this area must really be the one that has gone through a lot of change. There is virtually nothing except houses there now.

GB It has turned into a bedroom town altogether.

MG Can you describe what it was like when you first encountered it?

GB Well yes, when I first came up here, everything was a farm. There was a farm on every. I can't begin to tell you how many places there were farms, that there is nothing today but a cellar hole. Farming was the main business. Everybody relied on cows for their income, what little cash income they had. Herds weren't large. The cows were not real purebred cows. They weren't purebred at all. Every farmer had cows that he favored because they gave more milk. My friend, Stanley Pepper, who is Stanley Fitts up here across the field who was born here and farmed here. His father and grandfather's farm actually said one time at a Historical Society meeting that people had more time for visiting then. They would come down to the store and the creamery in the morning and they would be gone for a long time because they did so much visiting. That didn't happen at haying time. But in the winter and in the fall, when things weren't pressing they did, they stopped and talked with their neighbors. People knew each other. Well, when Burt Converse, my father-in-law died, there were half dozen men that showed right away to do the chores. No question about it, they came, that is all there was to it. The roads were all narrow. I remember that when I see pictures of them. Postcards, old postcards. There is one lovely postcard that says the Square at Maple Corner.

The road looks so narrow that two cars couldn't possibly meet in front of the store. Oh yes, everywhere you went on these back roads, there were farms all over the place. You think of that road that Mary Charrington lives on now, the Charrington place or the Robinson place as it was then. There were two farms beyond that. Then there was what Janet calls Happy Mountain and on beyond that there were two or three other places before you got over to Worcester. You used to be able to drive right through there to Worcester.

MG So besides fires which you mentioned before, what drove the farms out?

GB Why did the farms go?

MG Yes.

GB In my own opinion on that is that as soon as they started subsidizing milk in Wisconsin, it meant the end of milk production in Vermont on a big scale. I suppose, I think that is the real cause of it. Those farms out there on that land and they subsidize them because they are so far from New York and Chicago.

MG Who subsidized them?

GB The United States Government.

MG But they didn't subsidize Vermont farms.

GB It didn't have the same effect. They didn't need it so much. But they knocked the price down because of it.

MG When did that happen?

GB I don't know. I guess probably about mainly in the Roosevelt regime.

MG Speaking of Roosevelt, let me take a different line of question here. Do you recall the period of the Great Depression and what was the effect that that had in this State.

GB I wasn't here. I was up in Canada at the time. I was working up there. It had a tremendous effect of course. The farming had coasted to a stop. There was no place for people to go to get work. They were just poor that's all. I guess there were probably a lot of deer shot. Of course, there is no doubt at all in my mind that the two wars, the two big wars took a lot of people out of here. A lot of people went out to work in the shops and stayed there. The big shops in Connecticut. They didn't come back. They stayed. There is an awful lot of

deserted farm land all around us here. Any amount of it up in the settlement of what the old people call the settlement, what the new people call Apple Hill. There is not a farm up there now. It is beautiful fields up on top of the hill, lovely fields.

MG Sure

?? Describe what North Calais was like in the winter, in the era when Uncle Ike had the store, because it is such a unique place with the road dividing around, the store on one side.

GB North Calais, #10, it was called #10 you know.

MG ??? called them that.

GB The village was called #10 because it was #10 school district. It is called #10 by many people today. The pond is officially Mirror Lake now, but I call it #10. The store, that was a real country store. This was bigger, but it had the same affect up here. It was a place to visit. You would go in a sit down and talk. I have seen it in the fall, some of these old Kooks that were over there, quite a few at that time of Uncle Isaac. You would go over to the store and they would be sitting around the cold stove, in the end of August you know, somebody would say, well, pretty soon we will have to build the fires won't we and gosh how I dred it. Why they were looking forward to having that hot stove go, the way I look forward to a fire in the fireplace on a cold day. A deer just came out and went back into the woods up there you can't see it now. Just stuck her head out and went back in.

?? Was there a mill in North Calais?

MG A mill. Was there one in North Calais?

GB A mill. There were two stores at North Calais and there was a sawmill there, a woolen mill. I guess that is about all. There was a millinery shop there across the road from the store on the other road. The Red Shop was a millinery store. But it was an entirely different. It wasn't a bedroom, it was an active community. A great big brown store.

?? The store was underneath and there was a porch upstairs where Uncle Isaac ???

GB Uncle Isaac's store, the two-story building. There has been a lot of changes around here. There is no doubt about that. It is an entirely different life. It is a bedroom town now. The whole of Calais is.

Greg Belcher
Page 18

MG You talked about people leaving the town to work in the factories during the wars. What about when people started moving back or coming in here?

GB Many didn't move back. It is a bedroom town now.

MG I mean those people who have turned it into a bedroom town. When people began moving up to Vermont and Calais from urban areas?

GB Well there is still quite a lot of the old families here. The Morses, Fitches are pretty thick still. There is an awful lot of new people that work in Montpelier, Barre and in Burlington. People commute from here to Burlington. It is not the same as it was because people don't know each other. You get to know somebody, they go move off somewhere and you never see them again. There have been three or four nice families come here and then move away. There are some that have come and come to stay. A lot of people work for the State that live up here now. But there are not very many people that have farms.

MG How did the more established residents feel when these people started moving in?

GB They are pretty broad minded. They didn't mind. As long as they paid their bills and the taxes. I think most of the older people feel sorry that the farms have gone. See there are not a half dozen farms active in the whole township now I believe. There used to be so many. I know people that came from farm families and work for National Life.

MG There is not that sense of community anymore?

GB I don't think there is as much, not anywhere nearly as much. Certainly people don't seem to have time to visit. The stores are now merely convenient stores. They are not the main center of the community and an important place. I suppose if we lost the Maple Corner Store, well you would just have to remember more things when you went downtown.

MG What about town meeting as a way of seeing the change in the town? How is indifferent over the years?

GB I haven't been going to town meeting for the last 5 years much, but before that I was quite active there. I guess that there is not as many people coming to town meeting as there used to be. From what I have seen and what I have heard, but there is still some pretty hot times there. Have you been to town meeting?

MG When I lived in Calais, I used to go all the time. I was thinking about in the early 1970's, mid-1970's, as flatlanders were starting to move some, some of them had slightly different

opinions perhaps or views then that were current around here. There were some controversial town meetings and I wondered whether that was special to that time or whether it had always been like that.

GB Oh, I think there has always been one or two extra factions. There was a lot of talk about building the new school. That took a long long time. Just about the time, well I hadn't been here two days before they called me up and asked me if I would head up a committee to see if they couldn't get a new school. We got it alright. It took quite a lot of work. I put in a long hard winter the first winter I got here. Then one of the auditors died and I got appointed auditor and filled his place.

MG This is the elementary school you are talking about.

GB Yes.

MG Before that there were small local schools?

GB Yes, that is why #10 school district, there were 10 at one time.

MG In the town of Calais.

GB Yes. There were more kids and they had to have a school handy if they were going to have one at all. I remember hearing a sermon preached by the Rev. Gerald Fitzpatrick at the Old West Church one time calling attention to the fact that in Calais the people first had built the house to charter the family and then they built barns and stables to shelter the animals. Then they built the school and then as they should have done, they built the church. This was the right order to start with. They took care of the important things in the order that they needed taken care of. There was a school over on the main road at the mouth of the Converse Road and there was another school up this way on the Converse Road "The Short School House". Up here at the corner of the Brook Road, there was the Brown School House, the Maple Corner Schoolhouse, the #10 Schoolhouse, one in East Calais. I have left out a half dozen I am sure. I can't think of the names of some of them now. When they first started combining the schools, any child that went to the school that was on the corner up there and they would abandon that school had to walk to that school and then be picked up by what they called the school barge, the wagon that the kids went to school in. It carried them from the Brown Schoolhouse, where there isn't a schoolhouse now down past the cottage to Maple Corner. They carried them back to there and left them and they had to walk home from there.

Greg Belcher
Page 20

MG So that consolidating started before they were using buses and cars.

GB Yes.

MG Why did they start doing that, because the population was changing.

GB The population was thinning out. You can't run a school and only have four kids for it you know. I went to the Brown Schoolhouse for about two weeks one time during the flu epidemic. Dad sent us all up here. Mother and us three kids. Bill and Athley didn't want to go to school, but I wanted to go to school and I went to the Brown Schoolhouse, because Roy Slayton was there. I liked it.

MG What was it like?

GB Well I suppose there were 15 or 20 in the class altogether, all grades mixed. Of course, they knew I wasn't going to be there so they didn't really put me into a grade. They let me find some books, I could sit and read and recite as I wanted. I had a ball. But there was arithmetic class going on, a little girl teaching another little girl to read. It was wonderful, I thought it was great. Go back down to Boston with 25 or 30 people were in a room, nobody would listen to the teacher. It was a different atmosphere altogether. I thought it was just great. I loved it. I treasure that two weeks to this day.

MG There was one teacher for the whole school?

GB Yes, one teacher.

MG Were the teachers residents of the town or did they come in from other ???

GB Generally speaking they tried to get a job in the home town. Mother got her first job teaching down at the Morse Schoolhouse. That is just half way down to Montpelier. It has just been turned into a dwelling house now. Do you know how many cubic inches there are in a gallon?

MG In a gallon?

GB Yes.

MG No.

GB Mother went down there and of course she boarded around and she boarded the first week she was there, she boarded at the school director's house. When she came down for breakfast and sat

down to the table, she sat down at the table and the school director said young lady "How many cubic inches are there in a gallon?" and she didn't know anymore than you do. Well he said, I am going to tell you there is 241. I don't want you ever to forget that and mother told me that story and I have never forgotton it. It has been amazing to me how many times I use that figure when you decide what size you wanted a tank to hold so many gallons. What do you do? You got to find out how many cubic feet there are in it and you got to know how many cubic inches there are in a gallon. No trouble. Now of course, you put it into the computer. But there is 241 of them. I don't want you ever to forget that.

MG I probably won't.

GB But, she boarded around. I don't know probably 10 different places that winter. She taught up in the Maple Corner School too. Then she got married.

MG When you would come into Calais from where you were living, Boston or wherever in your car the Perry or any of the ones after that, what was the reaction of people. Did kids come running around to see it or was is sort of taken as a matter of fact!

GB Well at the time that we bought the Perry, the automobile was still a curiosity up here and just as soon as we got up here, we kids started doing the same thing. You would hear one coming, you would run out to the door and mother would get cross at us you know. Running out she said, you would think you have never seen one before. But you see, I can remember when you came out of the school on Columbus Avenue in Jamaica Plain and there would be a car stuck there or something happened to the engine and it wouldn't go and we would all get around and holler "Get a Horse, Get a Horse". Well they did that up here too. But they were curious about the cars. The telephone, that was a real interesting piece of equipment. We had two telephone companies competing for business here. On the west side of town here anyway we had the New England Telephone and the Orange County came up through here. The Orange County didn't last very long back to where it had to run on barb wire fences and what have you. Service wasn't too good. But we had the New England because Dad used to have to call Boston. He would ring for the center and he would hear all the cooks come off. Now he would say, if you will all hang up, I'll call you back and tell you what I said. But if you all listen in, I can't get through to Boston and hear a word. They would hang up and then he would ring the central number twice and he would tell them what he had been talking about.

MG Were telephones pretty common when you started coming up here?

GB Yes, I think pretty nearly everybody had one. I remember one time my wife telling about when she was at home and Lucy Bancroft called from the house up on the hill where Patrick Henry lives now and said "Josie would you look out and see that team that is going by, I don't know who it is. See if you can recognize them. Call me back, I would like to know who that is. I never saw that horse before." People knew each others horses. I was sitting up on the front steps with the road commissioner up in Maple Corner one day and the woman across the street came over and said "Eddie what's that (she had a photograph in her hand) do you know what that is? Eddie looked at it, why yes he said, that's Burt Converse's star. Burt Converse had been dead 50 years then, but Eddie recognized the horse still. Just the same as you would recognize a person.

MG Is there anything more you can think of?

?? Well, we have lots and lots of families stories, sayings and all this. They come back on occasion, but I think you have covered just about everything I remember you talking to me about. Certainly the feeling from the people that people had for one another and the sense of always being almost on call. You used to say how Grammy called and people would come and get her for everything. For death, children being born or somebody had an illness, she was the one they would ask to come.

GB A lot of cooperation between people. I remember during that flu epidemic that I spoke about earlier, Burt Converse had worked briefly for an undertaker in Montpelier. People that lived in the old Washington place up at the end of the road going by the cemetery you know, where those folks from New Hampshire summer now, you know the white house on the end of the road, there was family in there, the Adam's I think it was and they had a little girl die. They couldn't get an undertaker and they called up Burt and asked him what to do? People were always going to your grandfather and asking what should we do. Burt said I will come up and help you and he came up and they built a coffin and laid her out and they had the service. That's all. But there was always somebody to help. Always somebody to be helped. People would get hurt on farms. There were lots of accidents. Lots of accidents.

?? Some of them were really tragic too.

GB Oh yes. Like that boy down on the Montpelier road. He was haying and turning what we call tumbling and hit a nest of bees and ran and ran into his pitch fork and killed himself.

- ?? I know I was always amused at the story about Grammy Kahn writing plays or organizing these dramas they put on in the wintertime and how she took the lace tablecloth from the parlor and made a costume out of that and used a very lovely brass lamp which I have as one of the props for her play. But we have seen books around with her handwriting in them, because she organized the library. It is just remarkable how resourceful people were to make the long winter nights go by quickly. I love the story about the woman who went to the Pavilion.
- GB Oh that one. Amy Batchelder, she and Fred, Fred was the fellow that was such a hard worker but never got anything accomplished. It was butchered on the wrong day and all. He and his wife drove down to town with old Ben. He was named after Benjamin Franklin. He was slower than Old Ike. I do believe. But they went to town. They had to go for something. When they got down there, Amy had to go to the bathroom sometime along. When they got halfway home, Fred she said, I left my ring in the bathroom at the Pavilion Hotel.
- ?? They had to go clear back.
- MG What I need to do now is just record about a minute of the silence of the room, just the sound of the room without any of us talking, so if you could just meditate a little bit while I am doing that okay.