

Rodney Noble
August 7, 1987

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

- MK This is the 7th of August. This is an interview for Green Mountain Chronicles and I'm in Lunenburg with Mr. Rodney Noble. And this, as a way of working into this, I'm curious as to how you not living in Victory or Granby got involved in the Holiday in the Hills festival in their efforts to get electricity.
- RN Well for the first 23 years of my life, I did live in Granby. So that's how I came to be involved.
- MK I see. Where were you born there? Right in?
- RN I was born in St. Johnsbury, but lived all my life in Granby until I was 23.
- MK Uh huh, I see. What was it like living in Granby as a child? Was it very different from living in other Vermont communities?
- RN Well I, it's hard to say. There weren't a whole lot of activities going on in Granby. You had to, it was of course very rural. We didn't have television sets, at least not when I was real young. Later on, many of the families got their own generators and then television came to be. That was like in the '50's. But I don't think we thought we were any different than anybody else.
- MK How did it happen that these two towns were sort of bypassed as electricity came through?
- RN Because they were so far from any power lines that no power company would put them in there because it was too expensive.
- MK And not enough people to...?
- RN And not enough people to, the combined population of the two towns was about 100 in, you know in the 1950's. And the total number of meters was, well, if we stretched it and put it on the barns and things maybe 30. And the power company at that time would build a 1,000 feet of line for each meter. So we could get 30,000 feet. We needed 7 miles. (LAUGHING)
- MK That didn't go nearly far enough. Where did the idea come from or what was the plan, to try to, to try to get electricity initially?

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RN Well for many years, a lady by the name of Vera Bishop who lived in Granby and she was, well she was involved in the grange and 4H and she had been trying for a good many years to involve the State and NVDA and so forth.

MK NVDA?

RN NVDA, that's Northern Vermont Development Association. To see if electricity could be brought in somehow. They were largely unsuccessful, but it did lead to a meeting, I'm not sure if it was at her instigation or not, but with NVDA and some other interested people and people in the community, at which an idea like "Holiday in the Hills" was suggested just to publicize the fact that Victory and Granby had no electricity. And that was in 1958.

MK Interesting. I'm going to wait until the wind passes. It sounds like it's raining on this thing.

RN Those things are noisy.

MK What is, it's not a grape vine. No that's... Okay, so the initial thought was then just through publicity that...

RN Yea, from that meeting, it developed that, well they formed a committee and with a two-fold purpose. To publicize the fact that Victory and Granby had no power and but mainly to see if we could interest people in the area, sell them a chunk of land, have them build a camp, put a meter on. Okay, because the more meters you got, the more, the more power line could be built free of charge. By the way, if the price of putting the power in, according to Central Vermont Public Service at that time was \$125,000. Okay, that was their price. If we could come up with that, then we could have it. The, so really the purpose was to, not to pressure anybody to put it in, but the purpose was to get meters, as many meters as we could. People come in build camps and so forth. That did not work.

MK Did you get any new residents through the plan?

RN No we did not, not in those few years that Holiday in the Hills was going on. But, Holiday in the Hills, the first Holiday in the Hills program was in 1959 and it was originally thought to be a one-day, one-year affair. Well the next year, it became two days and it's been going ever since. It was a tremendous success. The newspapers, television, radios, they were all tremendously interested and made a good story and the story was carried all over

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the nation. And so eventually, eventually what happened was that Central Vermont was pressured into putting it in, because it made them look bad.

MK (LAUGHING) Embarrassed.

RN Right. The, well that was in 1959 and power was eventually achieved in 1963.

MK Was there any political pressure also brought to bear ?

RN Yes. There were other things that happened too. We had a, as long as we could keep this in the press, it kept the pressure on them all the time, we had a Christmas program one time at the church in which instead of using electric light bulbs because we didn't have any, we used actual candles lighted on the tree and that of course made the front page of the Boston Globe. And I understand that, that almost did it for us at that time. I think that was in 1962, '61 or '62, along about that time. But anyway, the town representative at that time, every town had a representative. And we had a gentleman by the name of Fox Hodge and he was also a member of our committee and he was working some in Montpelier to see what could be done and he happened to visit Washington Electric Co-op. We had a meeting with them and they would put electricity in. But they asked that volunteer help be obtained to clear the rights of way and that each person mortgage their property for 30 years. Okay. But at least that was, that was the beginning. It looked like something could happen. From that, a subsequent meeting was held at their offices in East Montpelier and while we were discussing the situation with them, a phone call arrived there from the Governor, who was Philip Hoff at the time and he had arranged a meeting between us and the President of Central Vermont Public Service, Albert Cree in his office if we could be there within an hour's time. So we did. And the Governor put us into his office, he stayed there for a few minutes and he might have had a couple of comments I'm not sure if he had too much to say while we were all there, left and from that meeting, Mr. Cree said that we could have, this was in the summer of 1963 and he said we could have power "by the time snow flies" is the way he put it, and we did. Um, there was...

MK At no cost to the town?

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RN Well, there was a little. It was virtually no cost. Instead of having bills every two months, you had them once a month, so that, that had your basic service charge in there. And that was for a period of five years and that was the only. So I would say, I don't know, maybe it was \$5.00 a month, \$60.00 a year, \$300.00 maybe.

MK It's certainly affordable by comparison to what they were initially looking for.

RN Oh certainly. At the, there was a misconception that Holiday in the Hills was formed to raise money to bring power in. Well we made a \$1,000 on our first Holiday in the Hills. So 125 years later, maybe we would have had it. So that was not the purpose of Holiday in the Hills was to raise money. But we can't get rid of that even today. People are always saying, well, you raised your money, what are you doing, you know, what are you doing with your money now. You've got your electricity and so forth. Well we never made very much money, but...

MK Well actually, it's interesting. I had seen the story in last year's Boston Globe which didn't mention that you were trying to raise money.

RN It didn't.

MK No, it didn't.

RN Well that's good, maybe somebody got the message.

MK It did not mention that it was an effort to raise money, no, so that's good at least. It's interesting. So, but then by that time the festival had been established and people thought it was just a nice thing to do?

RN Yea, after 1963, yes, we had power. Our goal had been achieved. We, there were too many people that just didn't want to give it up. They didn't really know what they were going to do or why they were going to do it, but it continued on for awhile. The next thing that came along was the Federal government wanted to build a dam on the Moose River and flood Victory bog. So then we, we, we reorganized and our goal came to be to prevent that from happening. Eventually the State of Vermont bought the land and they were also opposed to the dams, so that looks...

MK Has that not been officially resolved yet or?

RN Yea that, I'd say that's resolved.

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MK So the festival still continues now?

RN It still continues now. We are, but we are historical and environmental organization. That's our purpose. We just, we have done some restoration on the church. We've had a few, few projects which recognized the environment in some way. We don't have a great deal of money to do much with. But at least we're, we're involved with it and we're there if something needs to be done.

MK So does the festival draw in people from all over New England still or?

RN Oh, all over the, all over the United States and we even have a, nearly every year at least, we have somebody from Europe who happens to be there. Of course I'm sure they didn't come from Europe to visit us, but at least, they are there.

MK What kinds of activities go on then?

RN Well, essentially the same activities we've had since the first one. We have numerous arts and craft exhibits throughout the area. The cook shack dinners which originally started as lumberjack meals, served lumberjack style. The women put it on one day and the men the next. We still have cook shack dinners, but that separation between the ladies and gentlemen is not carried on. Blacksmith shop, and pump log boring, horse and pony pulling and we don't have oxen every year, but on numerous occasions, we do have oxen and either, either just to be there for people to look at or putting on some sort of a demonstration. Boy Scouts usually have an encampment. Canoeing in the bog. So there are a number of activities. Church services on Sunday.

MK So it's really very much in keeping with the purposes of the organization now?

RN Right, right. We try to keep it that way. There are those who cheat, but. (LAUGHING)

MK Are you still the chairperson?

RN Yes I am.

MK Okay. Just to talk a little bit about what it was like when electricity came in. Was there any kind of big celebration to mark the actual turning on of the lights in Victory and Granby?

RN Not the actual turning on of the lights, but we did, we had a big dinner in which all of the people of the two towns were invited to attend and also the workers from Central Vermont when it was completed. And the first pole had a big sign on it, first pole in Victory and Granby. So that's what we did to celebrate it. That happened to be, it was right around the time Kennedy was assassinated. I think it was the Sunday after he was assassinated.

MK That's, I was just thinking about, so that would be, do all of your children have memories or do any of your children have memories of...

RN Any of my children?

MK ...any of your children, life without electricity?

RN No.

MK No.

RN My first child was born in 1965, so.

MK Interesting. Did it change people's lives dramatically at that point? Had most of the people in the communities gotten themselves generators and?

RN Many of them did have generators. They all didn't. I think it became quieter because you didn't have those generators everywhere. The population of the town has, of the two towns, has increased since then. Whereas the combined population in 1963 was about 100, Granby's alone is close to 100 now. And Victory's has also increased. I don't know if, I think life has been made easier in some respects because with the generators you wouldn't have, well you have washing machines and dryers, people didn't have those. We did have television sets and lights and radios. That's about all you. You had refrigerators, but they were gas. Because every time, with those generators, every time something, most of them at least, you threw a switch, your light switch or something and the generators started up automatically, at least you hoped they would. Sometimes they didn't. So a lot of the things were gas like gas refrigerators, gas stoves and I think those probably have been converted over to electricity now, mostly.

MK Were there any people in the community that didn't really want electricity sort of liked it the way it had been?

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RN I don't recall a single person. If there was, they've all got it now. (LAUGH)

MK Interesting.

RN There may have been some campers, I don't know, people who had camps or something that didn't care about it. But if they did, they didn't voice any opinion on it.

MK Are the two towns heavy farming communities?

RN No.

MK No.

RN No, there is only one, no maybe two in the two communities that could be called a farm, but I don't think either one of them earns their entire living from that. Most of the people that live in, live there now are loggers, some retired people.

MK Was that also pretty much the case back in the '50's?

RN It was.

MK _____ Victory?

RN Yea, about the same. There were more people that had animals, but they weren't really farming. There were a number of people who worked out, you know, drove out to St. Johnsbury or somewhere to work. But I would say most of them are involved in logging.

MK I wondered because I've interviewed some people who talk about the difference that electricity made coming onto the farm in the '40's or the '30's.

RN Well it would have, it would have made, oh yes, major, right. Yup.

MK Interesting.

RN Well I think it was cheaper also. Electricity was cheaper because you'd go through a five gallon can of gasoline a night. Also I think if the same situation existed today, Victory and Granby would not stand a chance of getting electricity because, well electricity is so much more expensive and it's terribly expensive to build a line now. I know, I know people who have built houses where, first of all the power company won't even put in 1,000 feet now. So I know people who have built homes that have had to pay

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thousands of dollars just to get electricity and they aren't too far away from the line either, so. I don't think it would happen today.

MK I guess it's just a product of a unique time?

RN Right, it happened to be the right time.

MK When you were growing up, did you go to school right in Granby?

RN Uh huh.

MK Uh huh.

RN Yea, the school is still there and still operating. Well that, it was a first grade through eight at the time, all in one room.

MK Did the school have a generator for ...

RN The school did not have a generator, no. We had gas lights which were seldom used. For evening activities you used them but the building had windows practically all the way around it though, big, big windows, unless it was a dark day, it had good light.

MK Interesting. I know ^{with} my children now when the electricity goes out, it's a big thing.

RN Oh yea.

MK Get out the kerosene lamps, it's a real ^{ad}venture.

RN Right.

MK Is there anything you'd like to add about any of the story of Victory and Granby that we haven't gotten to?

RN Um, well I don't know if I should mention any names, but there were, there were some people who were real important in getting this started that perhaps if credit is to be given, it should be. And many of them are gone now, but some of them are still around. I did mention Vera Bishop. Horace Taylor was the first Chairman and he was Chairman for two years. John Irwin, he's now the district representative. It was under his direction that the cook shack was built for a total cost of \$75.00 by the way. Maude Lund was the town clerk, still is. She was town clerk at that time and still is. She put on the first, first dinners. Paul Cresser and Elton Lapoint; Paul is

still involved and Elton has passed away. My father, Clyde Noble. Those were the original founders. Later on when we, when our goal changed to the preservation of environment history, Fred Mold of the Fairbanks Museum had quite a lot to do with that.

MK I might try to see Maude Lund, also to see _____.

RN Yes.

MK It would be interesting to talk to her about those early dinners.

RN Yes, she would have quite a lot to tell you about that. My mother also has quite a good scrap book which goes back to the beginning, so. I'm sure she'd let you look at it, if you'd like to see it. (LAUGHING)

MK Okay good. Just let me get a little bit of background sound here in case I need that for editing purposes.