

Mary L. Pratt
March 3, 1988

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK I'm with Mrs. Mary Pratt in Burlington. It's the 3rd of March, 1988 and we are going to talk a little bit about Calvin Coolidge and maybe a few other things as we get going here. Okay, you were born in Cavendish, Vermont, right?

MP Yes.

MK And you have some early memories of Calvin Coolidge because he, Cavendish is close to Proctorsville?

MP Yes, Proctorsville is in the Town of Cavendish and Calvin Coolidge had a aunt in Proctorsville and some cousins who lived across the street from my parents' home in Proctorsville. And probably I was maybe 6 or 7 years old at the time that he was President and he used to come to visit his aunt and sometimes cousins there in Proctorsville. So the school must have been alerted to that and the teachers would bring the pupils, we'd march up with little flags and stand in front of his aunt's home and when the President would come along with his secret service and other people in his party, we would all start waving our flags and he usually looked at us and made some little sign of recognition and then went into visit his aunt and we would stay there until he came out and go through the same thing you know, waving our flags. This happened a couple of times when I was small. It might have been more than a couple of times. And of course I knew his relatives. I knew his aunt very well and because they lived more or less close to my parents' home.

MK Did you, did you ever talk with her about her famous nephew? Because you were quite a young child then, right?

MP I can't remember that. I used to visit her on occasion. There weren't many children on that end of the street, so I used to kind of make the rounds of all the elderly people and visit and talk with them. But I can't remember if I ever spoke to her about her nephew.

MK Do you recall whether he ever spoke to the children? Did he ever stop and chat with you or?

MP I don't believe so. I think I would remember that. He would just give a sign of recognition, possibly a wave. So I guess that was all.

MK Was it exciting?

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MP Yes, yes, yes. I remember it was real exciting. To me, at that time in my life, I had a great deal of patriotism from the time I was small. Well, up until present day, but I find that things are different today in that regard than they were then.

MK How do you mean?

MP Well it seemed as if we, in the schools we were, we were shown so many ways to appreciate our country more than what I've heard from my children and grandchildren of what is done today in the schools.

MK My children haven't started to school yet. (LAUGHING) I can imagine, I don't recall having ever met anyone really famous or important when I was about that age, but I could imagine that it would be so exciting to a young person.

MP It was. I don't what has made the change, possibly the automobile has made a big change in many phases of life. And...

MK Now would he arrive by car or?

MP Yes he would arrive. It was an old fashioned car. I can't, I'll say it might have been a Packard, an old, you know, pretty nice one, something on that type at that time. I don't know, it might have been a Rolls Royce, but somehow my, I'll say it was like a Packard.

MK Does he strike you as the kind of person who might not have had something so fancy as a Rolls Royce.

MP Well, I don't think that he wanted anything fancy at all. He was a man of very close to the people of Vermont and he, he never went for anything fancy, no.

MK Do you recall ever seeing him after he was no longer president? Would he still come to visit his aunt?

MP After I graduated from high school, I left that, my home and moved away, so I, I didn't see him that much, but I have seen him in Plymouth from time to time when he might be vacationing there and of course there were many tourists and I used to go and bring my friends there and from time to time would see him. And I think that he probably I'm sure visited his relatives there all the while I was growing up, but my fondest memories are of that, of those occasions.

MK Those are wonderful memories to have.

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MP Yes, yes they are. He was very much a Vermonter and he was of the quiet type and no frills, very plain speaking and plain in his living also.

MK I've been reading about him lately, very interesting background.

MP Yes, yes.

MK Very interesting fellow. Do you have any particular memories of his wife? Did you ever see her?

MP I believe that she probably was with him those times, but of course we were looking mainly for him and there were other people around, not as many secret service as they have today, but there were still quite a lot of people around. I don't remember specifically of ever seeing his wife, but I'm sure she was with him probably most of the time.

MK You mentioned in your letter that you also, there was a Civilian Conservation Corp camp in Proctorsville.
(~~Do you want to get~~ go ahead and take your time.) What do you remember about that?

MP I remember a lot about that because I was going to high school at that time and to have so many young people arrive in a small town, you couldn't help but be aware that, that there were things going on there. Especially, when it would be mail time and we used to have to go to the Post Office to get our mail and when there would be about 200 or 300 boys from out of town that would be waiting in line to go in and maybe more than 200 or 300 people there. That added up a lot and made almost made the population of the town double between the foresters that were there along with the CCC boys. So they played quite a part in life in the town and sometimes in surrounding towns giving shows. Some of the boys you know play musical instruments around at different entertainments. Also, they used to have dances for the public and all, but it was quite a thing to have so many people descend on a small town and it was cold when they first arrived. I believe it was almost the coldest winter that I have ever known in Vermont. I will say it was 1932 or 1933, but and most of them had never experienced the cold. Most of them were from New York City, right in the city itself, so they didn't have much knowledge of shoveling snow and how bad that could be, plus working out in that cold.

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MK What kind of work was done there? They actually worked through the winter then?

MP Yes, they build a, a park there that was; they put up fireplaces and little houses like where people could go and picnic and the fireplaces that they build were really beautiful and the park was beautiful, but it is not a park today that I know of. It wasn't kept up for some reason and at one point I believe people were told they could take the stones and things if they had any need of them away and a lot of the, I don't know if there are any of the fireplaces there or I don't believe even the buildings, the buildings are there today. It's possible there might be one or two, but my last knowledge of going there to look around, you would never know they had been there hardly.

MK Is it all overgrown now or?

MP There are roads that you can drive through it, but it will, it is of course trees and bushes and all are growing there and as I say you'd hardly know they had ever been there now. It was too bad because it was a, a pretty park.

MK What was the name of that?

MP I think it was called Park Proctor Piper Forest, I believe that was the name of it.

MK Did you get to know any of the young boys or men who were there working?

MP Yes, you would get to know them through going to dances or you met them everywhere you know. They were all over the place and so eventually you got to know a few anyway.

MK It must have had quite an effect on a small town;

MP Oh yes, it certainly was. It was, it was of course being young perhaps I didn't feel it that way as much as older people. I remember my mother going, say walking out of an evening and the perhaps the town constable would escort her home or, so that you know she wouldn't have any unpleasantness with any of the men, but I never heard, ever of anything improper ever that happened there with the townspeople. I think a lot of them got along well. They used to play pool in the one building there and anything that was going on, they would show up for different things. But mainly it would be for dances. Some went to the churches, local churches.

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MK Did they put on plays too, sometimes?

MP They put on entertainment, but I can't remember if you would just say plays, but probably mostly a musical, singing and someone playing the piano or guitar, something like that.

MK I've interviewed a few of the, a few of the men who were involved, who were from Vermont and went through and joined the three C's or were foresters or anything ever connected with it. It was an interesting time.

MP There were a few that stayed behind when they, when this group left and I can't remember just how long the camp might have been active now because I don't think I was living there when it was closed finally. But there was some stayed and married girls from around some of the various towns. I think there were two that I can think of in Proctorsville that stayed and married local women.

MK To go back, jumping all over the place here, but to go back a bit, one thing that we are asking everyone because these again will be topics that we're in some way going to deal with through this series. We're asking everybody about such things as their earliest recollections of radio, telephone, and electricity and depending on where you were, you may not have gotten electricity until very late. I was wondering whether Cavendish, Proctorsville area had electricity when you were growing up?

MP As long as I can remember, we had electricity. I'll say that we had our first radio in 1928. It was an Atwater Kent and you had to have earphones to listen to it and you sat you know near it and with the earphones. It was a very powerful radio, very good for being one of the first that we had. The telephone, we didn't have a telephone in my house until about 1938. And it was difficult if there was an emergency, we went across the street to one of the neighbors. Finally my dad had a lot of illness and the phone was put in on that account and so then there was a phone there always after that. But in the beginning we didn't have one.

MK Did you not want one in the beginning or?

MP I can't remember myself of needing. Young people didn't call each other on the phone like they do now. I find I can't live without the phone today, but at that time it didn't seem any great necessity unless an emergency did

come up, which did come to us finally and that was how we finally had a phone put in. That would have been probably around 1938.

MK How did those earlier phones work? Did everything have to go through a central operator at that point?

MP I believe so, yes. You would ring. You'd have a little crank like and you, on the side and you would ring it and the operator would come on immediately and then you gave her the number that you wanted.

MK Was the telephone operator in those days kind of a real sort of social connection to the community? I mean the operator knew who was who and if somebody was looking for someone, knew where to find them?

MP In a way it was a much more social thing than it is today. I believe the operator knew about everybody when she would get them on the phone and, and being in a small town, most everybody knows everybody and what's going on with them. It seems long time ago that those things happen, but it was very more of a, of a social type of thing than it is, certainly is today. You would get help. With I think it was almost easier probably then to get help on the phone especially in a small place because the operators usually knew where you were. Well, it just seemed like now that it was easier then, but probably isn't, but seemed that way.

MK Now to go back to the radio, on the original Atwater Kent if you can remember, what kinds of programs did you listen to? Did you have regular evening programs that became important as a family to

MP Mostly we listened to anything that my parents wanted. I can remember my father liked to listen to Amos and Andy. You've probably heard of them and they were quite popular for quite awhile back then. And there was a mystery, mystery program, I'll say the name of it was "The Squeaking Door" or I'm not just sure if it is "Squeaking Door" or, but anyway you would hear the door squeak when the program would start and made you feel real creepy you know. But I can't remember if it was squeaking door or some other name, but it was, I think probably most people of that era would know what it was. Um, there was a man on it with the name of Lamont Cranston who was the main actor I would say on that program and it was pretty popular in that day. I don't know how many people remember that name. I don't know how I remembered it.

- MK It's funny, I've heard the name and I had no idea and it sounded familiar to me when you said it and I had no idea what to connect to it, so. (LAUGHING) It's interesting. Do you remember, this would have been quite a bit later than 1938 or '28 rather, but do you recall soap operas on the radio? When would they have come along do you think?
- MP They've been on a long time. I don't know if they, I'll say 1930 possibly. It seems as if they've been on the air forever to me. But I will say, I will give that date. I would think that would be close.
- MK So do you, you remember listening to them on the radio or at least knowing that they were?
- MP I knew that they were on probably at times my aunt who lived next door who was always listened I believe from probably when they first started and she listened to them right up until her death, so I anytime I went there to visit which was frequent, they would be on and she would be knitting or crocheting and listening to those. Oh, I've got to say, I'll say 1930. I may be way off, but I give a good guess on that.
- MK That's interesting. What, what do you think the radio, ~~the~~ coming of radio changed in terms of how families passed their spare time in the evenings? Did, I mean for instance, now television, it's possible for a family to sit in the same room with each other for hours and nobody ever talks to each other, you know.
- MP Yes.
- MK Did that begin with radio do you think or was there still quite a bit of interaction as a family and the radio was in the background?
- MP That was the way it was in my home. The radio was there and you used it if you know at times. It wasn't a thing that was on all day like today people get up in the morning and turn the television on and it's on til they go to bed or and mainly a lot of people probably that's their main form of entertainment at home, but my mother was a school teacher and she believed in getting outdoors and doing things, a lot of the things that I know and have done today my mother taught me very early as, so I have never been dependent on the radio or television for entertainment. I, I'd like, I would hate to be without either one, but I can live, I could live without either if I had to.

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MK In terms of other ways of just keeping informed, how quickly did the radio take an important place in terms of oh, farmers listening to know what the weather would be or people listening to know what was going on in the community, when did people begin to depend would you say on, on...

MP On radio?

MK ...on radio as opposed to you know a weekly newspaper or?

MP And the newspaper was always very important. I think in probably in all homes it and that era, that the paper, the newspapers were the most important. The radio came along and people I believe used it more for entertainment than for knowing about the weather or news, but gradually that all was part of it and I'll say that probably somewhere before World War II, before, well when the stock market crashed along in that period. Of course there was a lot of that on the radio and all and I will say that maybe for a few years it was more entertainment and finally evolved into people depending on the news and the weather on that. I'm not sure of that entirely, but I know that I believe the newspaper was the most important thing in the house and was, it was just a must that you read the newspaper.

MK Did you grow up reading the newspaper?

MP Yes and I still do. And I, I feel that one that doesn't (PHONE RINGING) read the paper misses a lot.

MK Do you want to get that? I can unclip you.

MP I had better.

-- resumes }

MK Okay, let's see. Where were you living during the 1927 flood? Did that affect you in your part of Vermont?

MP I was living in Proctorsville and I remember that day very well. I can't remember the date, but at some point, I remember someone coming by our house and saying that half of Cavendish had fallen away. It just disappeared. We just couldn't visualize part of Cavendish disappeared. We couldn't visualize it at all. Finally, my father came home from work and took us down to Cavendish to see what happened and that was it. There was this house at the end and everything had opened up just like it was an earthquake and there wasn't, you could see a thing only rubble for a couple of miles. Everything had rushed down through into what they call Whitesville and a lot of it, the rubble had stopped there somewhere. I believe there

is a little dam down there and so a lot of the rubble and afterwards people used to go down there to look for, for their belongings and so on, but I doubt if very much was ever found. It was just as if that end of the street had just gone. There was nothing there, nothing left. This house that, the first house that was left was just hanging like and could have gone down into the cavern like, but it didn't and they were able to keep that house. I can't remember the name of the people that lived in it, but it was an awful flood and people in that town were asked to take in people that were affected in our town. Even the streets were, water was up like a foot or more in the streets and some people that were down lower, we happened to be up on a little rise away from the street, so we were lucky and we took some friends in for the night. It might have been a night or two. But what happened in Cavendish was just a something I've never seen anything like it since. I can just compare it to what I what a bad earthquake must be.

MK Did you have any family or friends in other parts of Vermont that you wondered about when all this was happening?

MP No, we, we had people in Rutland, but I don't, I can't remember that they had it very bad there. It could have been in some streets, but I don't remember that.

MK Communication was pretty much severed ~~then~~
throughout the state.

MP Right.

MK Did you, did your family realize at the time that the flood was as big as it was, that so many communities were affected?

MP No, no. I'm sure that they didn't and mainly when this ~~was~~
happened in Cavendish, well that was a real shock to everybody in that community and of course everyone offered to help and did what they could. Those people that lost their homes, they had to live with other relatives or friends that would take them in until the Red Cross came in and did a lot there and eventually the, they received enough money to rebuild I believe, but they rebuilt in other parts of Cavendish. I just don't remember how many that might have had to do that, but...

MK There were tremendous numbers of people affected.

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MP Yes, yes and I remember that the Red Cross did an awful lot at that time there. But it was a real shock. I, I have a, I believe somewhere I have a picture of it, but right at the moment, I don't know where it is, but I did have one and I think I do, I could look it up and see if I could find it.

MK I have, I have seen pictures, I'm not sure whether I've seen a picture of Cavendish, but I have seen pictures of other communities and as you said it did look just like a devastation after an earthquake or a bombing or something terrible _____.

MP You wonder what it even at that time, it was there yesterday and today it was gone, but when you were looking at it, you almost wondered what was there, what was there. You could almost, now visualize what had been there that had gone so completely that and such devastation. It seems to me that I remember that someone had a safe, a big safe like you'd have in a store and that, that was found but I don't believe there was much of anything ever left or found. Everything was broken right up in little pieces.

MK Were there many people who died or were injured in that area?

MP I think the people were lucky enough to get out before it happened. I don't believe anybody died or that there was anyone injured in this, but how they must have had a warning, probably a rushing of water sound possibly or a rumble of some kind so that they did get out of the house. But as far as I remember, no one died or was hurt.

MK At least not in your community, huh?

MP No, right.

MK As we go just a little bit ahead then, when the Depression came, what were your parents doing in terms of income and employment? How did that affect the family?

MP Well, my family actually was not affected at all by the Depression. My father worked for Pollard Brothers who were relatives of the, they were cousins I believe of Calvin Coolidge and my father worked for them for sixty years and he was there of course at the time of the depression and his job went along just the same as it ever had. In fact, he always was very appreciative to those people that, that his job was kept safe and that he didn't have to do a lot of the things. We didn't suffer at all

really because of the Depression. On that account that he always had his job there. But many people in the town lost their jobs and were on relief and that type of thing. And many people had to go to other states to work, send their money back home to families and, but we were not touched by that. Our whole family was always grateful for that to the Pollards.

MK The Pollard family ran a store?

MP Yes, it was a general store in Proctorsville and my father worked there sixty years and my uncle worked there sixty-two years. So they were, in fact, they outlived most of the people that, that had hired them you know. And the one remaining person in the family that was running the store at the time of my father's death would have been Miss Hermoine Pollard and you've probably heard, heard of her. She's still alive, by the way and lives in Proctorsville in her old home.

MK It's incredible. Your father must have started working really young then to have worked sixty years.

MP Yes.

MK For the same place.

MP It's a lifetime for a lot of people. Um, yes he was young when he started there and my, around the time that he started there, I believe, my grandfather died. I never saw my grandfather, so my father had to take care of his mother. He was the youngest child in the family, so he was delegated to do that and so he had other ideas at one point of doing something else, but decided it was best that he took this job and it was near home. He could go, you know, he was able to look after his mother.

MK It's amazing. So he never really travelled much then beyond?

MP We travelled around a lot, around the state a lot, not too much other than that, but my, I believe my father said that he had been in every town in the state except three and I don't know what those three were. I did know, but I can't remember them. But he just wanted to, he loved Vermont and just, he travelled when he could, but working I think most of his life probably worked ten hours a day a long in there. They worked from 7 in the morning til 9 at night if I remember when I was real young. Then later hours were cut down, but and that was six days a week.

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MK It didn't leave him much time for travelling?

MP No, no. So I can say this over. The quality, I'll say the quality of life was much better than it is today, not in the way we don't have practically everything to go to see or to do or to use, but in getting together with people and talking and reading and, well there was much more conversation than there is today because you go somewhere maybe today and the television is on. I think television is the one thing that has spoiled good conversation in the world today and the getting together of families. We used to do that a lot more.

MK I don't know whether it's the automobile or television or what

MP Well the automobile...

MK What exactly, but in hearing people talk about, it, just time is something that seems to me to be, to have changed so much. There's such pressure for things to move quickly.

MP Yes, yes. Life was more serene. Not that people didn't have their problems at all, but I will say that before World War II, life was much more serene and I'll have to say happy than it has ever been since World War II. We didn't have the money (TELEPHONE RINGING)

MK Do you want to go ahead and answer that? I'll unclip you here. Well thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

ringing
stop

MP Well, you're welcome.

MK I just want to get a couple of minutes here of the sound of the room before we stop and then I'll unclip you.

MP Uh huh.