

Evelyn Whittemore
January 31, 1989

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG This is January 31, 1989. Mark Greenberg conducting an interview for the Green Mountain Chronicle Series for the Vermont Historical Society with Evelyn Whitmore.

EW Whittemore.

MG Whittemore, Okay. And we're in Plymouth, Vermont. We're going to talk about Calvin Coolidge. Can you, can you, is it Mrs. Whittemore?

EW Yes.

MG Okay. Can you tell me what your connection to Calvin Coolidge would be?

EW Well actually it isn't my connection, it was my dad's, it was childhood friends. And of course when he used to come up here in the season of course, my dad...

MG Excuse me for one second, I have a noise I have to try to...okay it seems to be there so. I'm sorry, could you start that again.

EW Well I say the connection was actually my dad which was well he grew up with him as kids and then after he was President whenever he came up he would, in the season of course, want my dad to go fishing with him which he did. And then he used to do quite a little bit of work for him at the notch, around the farm and or whatever. And you know several things like that.

MG What was your father's name?

EW Julian Hall

MG And ah, can you, do you know anything about their, their boyhood friendship? When did they first get to know each other?

EW Well that of course was a little difficult for me, but I do remember, I don't remember I mean, but my dad, they had a canon that used to be on the square up there and they had what they called the Notch Boys and what they called the Union Boys. They used to steal it back and forth. Well he was in on it and so was my dad.

MG Which were they, Notch or Union boys?

EW Of course he, Coolidge was Notch and my father was Union.

MG That referred to Plymouth Notch and Plymouth Union?

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EW Uh huh.

MG I see.

EW Uh huh.

MG Do you have any idea what kind of a kid Coolidge was?

EW Well he was a bashful kid, shy, I remember my dad saying. And, well he was just an ordinary kid actually. He was into deviltry just as much as any other kid. And well like I say, actually my dad, it's more him than of course me. And one time I know Bill, I told Bill this and he was very interested. They were fishing like I say whenever he'd come up fishing. My dad would let him you know go ahead of him and he'd fish behind him. Well this day, he said to my dad, he called him Junior. He says, "How come," he says, "I go ahead of you and I don't get any fish? You go behind me and you get them." Well he says, "I use a whole worm on the hook." He got a big kick out of that. And normally you know they do speak of him as being sort of stingy and close. Well actually he wasn't to that, to my knowledge anyway. Well of course perhaps he was with others. Naturally he probably was. Wonderful person.

MG So you personally met him, you _____?

EW Oh yes.

MG Give me a description, a physical description? Tell me why you say he wasn't stingy, why he was wonderful?

EW Well it always seemed to me especially with the neighbors that he was, wasn't like that at all. Of course I don't know how, you know, in, away from here or anything. Of course I was a kid growing up more or less. But he never appeared that way to me or nor to my dad. But like I say, they were the ones that were you know really friends. And I'll tell you another one if you could see him. Of course he won't be up here until it opens, his old _____. Oh, I know it's at least, he can tell you everything because when people come in and ask me different things that I don't know or can't tell, I send them to him.

MG But he's in Florida now?

EW He's in Florida. But he'll, he'll be back up there I'll guarantee it.

MG So you knew Coolidge before he became President?

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EW Well yes, we used to see him of course, but nothing like afterwards. I know that, it was just a few days after he was President. He had I guess they call it a Welcoming Day. There was him and his wife, his father and his two sons and they had, they were on their lawn, the homestead and he was greeting people. I was up there, I remembered it. And then we had some pictures, but I don't have them now of him and my dad and you know like that. I don't know where they are.

MG That's okay. How old were you at that time?

EW I was a teenager.

MG And so, did he, he continued coming back to Plymouth after he was President?

EW Oh yes, yes. He was every time, every chance he could get. And I really think that he would have been here had he lived because he had an addition built on to where I worked the homestead and after he died, well after the State took over really, the State didn't want it. They wanted it as it was. So they moved that addition up into the lot and the son built onto it, built his home onto that.

MG Did you ever speak with him?

EW Oh yes.

MG What was he, what was it like to speak with him?

EW Well I don't know, just the same I guess as anyone.

MG Now this was after he was already President?

EW Uh huh.

MG Well, didn't, did it feel special to be speaking to the President of the United States?

EW Well yes, yes it would naturally. Because I can remember so many times being up there and my dad sitting on the porch with him and Mrs. Coolidge. Oh, she was a charming person. And well you know little things happened you know like that as a kid, as you're growing up. You don't pay that much attention really.

MG Do any come to mind?

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EW Not really, not any, other than that, of course that was a special day, the day that he had to, well as I say, I guess you'd call it a Welcome because he was shaking hands and talking with everyone.

MG Today, when you see on television pictures of the President and for years they're always lots of secret service people...

EW Oh yes.

MG ...and all kinds of protection and security, was it like that when he would come, when Coolidge would come up?

EW Well I suppose, but of course you didn't see that much of it. I know one incident. My father was fishing down below here in the lake with some friends from Springfield, Mass. and he saw Coolidge's car. Of course he knew the car, the Limousine. And he started up into the road you know to say Hi to him or to wave to him. And of course the secret service was right there. Well they, they grabbed onto him of course naturally and Coolidge saw what was happening and he jumped out of the car and says, "Heh, leave him alone." And so he took my father in the car and brought up home.

MG What did he look like? Can you describe him physically?

EW Yes, he was slender. I'd say probably about, oh in around 6 feet perhaps. Not heavy at all. He was slender. And well just to me like a more or less old married person. Of course, he was President. Well after he was President he used to be up here more of course. I know in the '27 flood, my sister died and he sent flowers, beautiful flowers. And of course when his son died, my dad naturally sent a card to him and flowers and things. And when he sent the card back when my sister died, he says he knew what he was going through, how painful it was. And that was in '27. Then of course he got out of the presidency in '28.

MG Do you actually remember the night he became President?

EW Yes, well no not actually because that was all taking place during the night.

MG Well do you remember...

EW I remember the next morning of course.

MG Yes, tell me about that.

- EW Well the next morning, oh, you should have seen Plymouth. You couldn't believe the people. No, see that happened during the night, actually at 2:47 in the morning. And of course they didn't have, at his place, they didn't have a phone, so they had to come up, they sent someone from Bridgewater. That was where the telephone office was and they sent someone from Bridgewater up to tell him the news. And then of course naturally he had to prepare to get to Washington.
- MG Give me as, as much of a description as you can of what it was like in Plymouth the next morning when the news got around.
- EW Oh, well it's hard, like I say, there was so many people, naturally. That really actually it was just, just, well a big event naturally in a small town. And they know naturally all of the neighbors and people naturally were very happy for him. Of course under the circumstances, the President dying it didn't, you know in that respect.
- MG Were there places in town where people would gather to talk about what was going on?
- EW I don't think so. There could have been I suppose, but I don't remember that much too much.
- MG So it's mostly just people coming out and talking to each other, parading around?
- EW Uh huh, uh huh.
- MG And then a few days later, he had this event that you were describing before?
- EW Yes. Well sort of like a, well a Welcome. He was shaking hands and visiting with people. I know there was a lot of people there that day.
- MG Were they mostly local people?
- EW No, no. Of course naturally all of the townspeople I suppose were there. And then of course other people that had heard about it were there.
- MG What is the population of Plymouth now?
- EW Oh I don't know. It's, I know at one time there was a lot of people here, but now, I think it's around perhaps 500 - 550 perhaps.

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MG And do you have any idea what it was back then?

EW No not then because that was before my day.

MG Was it bigger or smaller than now?

EW Oh bigger.

MG Oh yea.

EW Yes. Much bigger.

MG Now as we were saying before, Plymouth is, well the Coolidge homestead is the central part of it and the ski industry in the winter time...

EW Yes.

MG ...but back then before Calvin Coolidge was President and there was, and his home was an historic site and that was before the development of the ski industry, what was Plymouth like and what was, what was happening in Plymouth?

EW Well actually, mainly I would say it was farming. I would say it was a farming country. I know we had a farm. My dad had a farm. But really I don't know. And then I know they used to have lime kilns and burn lime because I know we had three on our farm that my father used. (TELEPHONE RINGING) Of course there was probably others you know, but as a kid really I don't remember that much. Because like I say, it was just an everyday happening.

MG Do you remember how it struck you when you heard that this man that you knew was now President?

EW Well, of course naturally I was excited as well as anyone. But I don't know, just a, just a big event that's all.

MG Of course he had been Vice President so...

EW Uh huh.

MG ...you already had a celebrity for a neighbor.

EW Uh huh.

MG So maybe we should back it up to that because that was really the first big thing that happened to him was when he became Vice President.

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EW Well I don't remember that much of it so, really, the Vice Presidency, so much as President. But oh, of course it was exciting for you know a little town like this to everyone, not only me, but all, all the people.

MG Before, we mentioned the reputation that he has and you mentioned frugality, but the other of course the major image of Calvin Coolidge is "Silent Cal."

EW Oh definitely.

MG Can you comment on that? Is that accurate? Is it inaccurate?

EW Well perhaps he was with other people which he no doubt was. Like when they wanted him to run again for President. "I do not choose to run." Well he was a man of few words. That's the only way you can put it. Of course he wasn't like that with people he knew naturally.

MG What was he like with people he knew?

EW Just the same as any _____ person, friendly with them.

MG Was he a story teller or a chatter box?

EW No. Well you know, I read this and I can't tell you where I read it, but it was a fact I suppose. They said that there was no other person in history that had made as many speeches as Calvin Coolidge. Of course that I can't _____ now, because it was something I read.

MG Did you follow his political career and what he did as a President?

EW Not too much no.

MG What about your father? Did he talk about him much? Did he...

EW Oh yes.

MG ...take pride in the fact that his fishing partner was the President?

EW Yes, yes he did. And when he, I suppose it was a thrill for anyone to ride in his limousine which he used to.

MG Your dad did?

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EW Uh huh.

MG Did you ever ride in it?

EW No.

MG Is that how they would go off to go fishing in the limousine?

EW Uh huh.

MG Can you describe what a fishing trip would be like?

EW Well, just, I don't know of course, I never did that, but I suppose it would be the same as anyone going fishing. I know he liked it very much.

MG Did they have a particular spot they went to fish?

EW No, the rivers usually or the brooks perhaps you'd call them. Mainly that's where he used to go here. I don't know of my dad ever going lake fishing with him. Of course he could have I don't know, but I don't remember it.

MG What was the reaction after his death?

EW Well, that was, well of course naturally the townspeople were very upset over it. And it was actually a sudden death. And of course he had a heart condition. That was known, but like I say it was and he was young, he was only 60. And that certainly was young. No, but like I say, I do think he would have been back here. Of course, maybe not, I don't know, but I really think he would have. Yea. Oh, they were nice people, very nice people. You couldn't say anything different. Of course, as a kid growing up you know, you don't pay that much attention really. Like perhaps my dad did or my aunts and uncles perhaps, but as a kid, it was just a big event.

MG How's it feel now when you think back to think, gee, I knew a President of the United States?

EW I don't know, it makes me proud I guess. Of course, naturally we _____ oh, so many people and they all, of course naturally ask questions which I hope that I can answer. Of course I can't naturally all of them because his years are, after his college years, well he was just in another state. But like I say he was always here whenever he could be.

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MG Do you think that history has been kind or unkind to Calvin Coolidge?

EW Well, yea I think it has been kind to him.

MG So the image of "Silent Cal" is, is not a cruel image or an unjustified image?

EW No.

MG Though it sounds from what you're saying that there was a whole other side to the man also?

EW Oh definitely. Well he was two people. Of course he used to say things, tell, well I mean naturally not too much of course, but like him and my dad, he'd tell him you know different things. He'd ask him about different things and he would tell him, he would tell him different things. Of course naturally he couldn't tell him everything.

MG You mean things concerned, concerning national policy?

EW Uh huh.

MG The ins and outs of Washington?

EW Uh huh.

MG So your father was a kind of confidant of his?

EW Sort of. Yea. In this, they call it the "Wild of Barn" up to the Notch. There's a picture of Coolidge pitching hay up onto a load of hay and on that load of hay is my dad. And there's probably others because he used to go up there and do, you know, do different things. Worked up there around, or you know, just little things perhaps.

MG When?

EW When he was President. Uh huh.

MG He would come back and he would pitch hay and...

EW Worked on the farm.

MG Sort of like Reagan going out and cutting brush on his, his place out there...

EW Uh huh.

MG ...in California?

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EW Uh huh.

MG Yea.

EW Reagan was a great admirer of his. Yea.

MG Do you think there's any similarity between the two?

EW Oh, gee I really don't know. Of course I don't know, of course in later years I suppose everything was different anyhow, but I really don't know. I couldn't answer.

MG Working up at the homestead, what kinds of questions do people most often ask? What do they want to know about Coolidge?

EW Well actually more of his childhood and the things he did growing up as a kid. And then of course naturally they'd ask things about the Presidency.

MG Uh huh.

EW And especially when you know he was inaugurated there by, by, sworn in rather by his father. We have everything right there just as it was that night. Have you ever seen it?

MG No I haven't. Can you give me a description? This is for radio so nobody is going to be able to see it through this program, but maybe a description from you would help. What the place looks like and you go in the door and then what you see?

EW Well it's all back years, the living. Well, they had, well of course they had a, a, they have electricity there now which they didn't have of course. And the housekeeper that they had there, his father had, she, she wouldn't have a telephone, she wouldn't have a bathroom, none of that. And she had her rules and they lived by them. Because I know my dad used to say, "It seems strange that someone could tell the President of the United States what to do." He said, "She's done it too many years and we would never, never, never would argue."

MG What was her name, do you know?

EW Aurora Pierce.

MG Are there any relatives of hers who are _____?

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EW I don't know for sure but I think somewhere along the line there, that this Midge Aldrich, of course actually her name is Ruth, but they always called her Midge was a relative I do believe. But she never married. She was a spinster, she never married. But she went there after, let's see I think it was his second wife passed away and she was there and she lived there until she passed away which was, well I don't know, but at least, well I guess she lived there about 30 years after he died. Because she died in, which it wasn't too awfully long ago, I can't remember the exact date, but she stayed there.

MG So this was actually, this was his father's house, right?

EW Uh huh.

MG And it was an old fashion Vermont house...

EW Yes.

MG ...without plumbing or electricity?

EW That's right.

MG What was their status as Vermont farmers? Were they poor farmers or were they well off?

EW Well, some of them were well off. I suppose the same as any industry. Some of them make better than others.

MG Right. The Coolidge's I mean though?

EW Oh yes. Of course they had the Cheese Factory. His father had the Cheese Factory which now, oh you have no idea the amount they sell. Of course that was, he had that with other farmers I suppose that used to bring their milk there. Now that cheese factory is really a money maker.

MG What is its name, what is it called?

EW The Plymouth Cheese Corporation.

MG And that was started by Coolidge's father?

EW Uh huh.

MG Did Coolidge ever work there?

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EW I don't know, probably did. Because I guess he knew, you know, what it was. He had his chores to do just the same as any kid.

MG Did he show that you, anything, to your knowledge, did he show any interest in politics as a kid living around here?

EW No.

MG Never became involved in the town or anything?

EW No I don't think so. Of course his father was.

MG Can you tell me about that?

EW His father I know used to be in the Legislature. And then of course the town officers liked to, well selectmen, well of course I don't think we had alderman or anything or councilmen or anything like that. But he, he had, you know, held town offices, his dad. Yea.

MG But Coolidge himself, Calvin Coolidge didn't participate in town meeting or run for any town office?

EW No. See he left here, see he graduated from this school up here.

MG Which school is that?

EW Plymouth School and then he went to Ludlow to Black River Academy, his high school. And then from high school he went to Amherst College and he studied law. And from college he went into a law practice in North Hampton, Mass.

MG And then became Governor of Massachusetts?

EW Uh huh, oh, he held so many different, you know councilman, and alderman and Mayor everything, then Governor and then I suppose from Governor, he went to President.

MG Were people around Plymouth surprised?

EW No I don't think so because he was, he was an ambitious kid.

MG How did he show that?

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EW Well of course I really don't know. I couldn't answer it actually. Just seemed like, well more or less to all of us as another towns person.

MG So do you have, are there any stories that you can recall at all about him and your father, stories your father may have told after a fishing trip, even little anecdotes can be very interesting?

EW Gee, no, just that one in particular and like I told you, the FBI.

MG Was he a good fisherman, did he catch any fish?

EW Well he didn't seem to, too many according to what dad, but he liked it regardless. No because like I told you, that remark he made, he couldn't understand how he could go behind him and catch them and he couldn't.

MG Okay, well if we could just sit quietly for a minute, I need to just let the tape run for about 30 seconds and that should do it.