

Interviewee: Colleen Haag
Interviewer: Fritz Horton
Date: February 2002

Colleen Haag was born in Shelburne and spent her youth on the Thomas farm. She was educated in the Shelburne and CVU school systems and has served as Shelburne's town clerk since 1982.

Topics discussed: farming, town meeting, Village school, CVU, PTO, Korny Kapers, St. Catherine's Church, town residents, Shelburne Museum, Ticonderoga, Shelburne Museum, JFK assassination, Noonan Family, Thomas Family

Fritz Horton: How long have you lived in Shelburne?

Colleen Haag: Practically all my life, which is 52 years.

FH: Were you born here?

CH: I was born in Burlington, actually, but we lived in Shelburne at the time.

FH: Who were you parents?

CH: My parents were Jerrold and Ruth Thomas.

FH: They are not living?

CH: They are not living

FH: Where were they born and where did they go to school?

CH: My father was born in Charlotte and cam to Shelburne when he was a baby. He went through the Shelburne schools. He went to high school in Burlington and then attended the University of Vermont before going into the service before World War II. My mother was born in Jericho – her maiden name is Packard. She was born in Jericho center and married my father in 1946 – after the war.

FH: What did you your father and mother do?

CH: My mother worked in Burlington, during the war, in an office. My father was a navigator on bombers during World War II. He served in the South Pacific

FH: Your family had a farm?

CH: We had a large farm on Thomas Road. There were two farms. My great grandfather moved here in 1900. The original farm was for my uncle Eustace, actually. He bought the farm from my great grandfather – from his father. That is still on Spear Street extension. My grandfather – Eustace's brother – bought the adjoining the farm. That farm adjoined his on Thomas Road and it took up most of Mount Philo Road on the east side of the road all the way to Charlotte.

FH: What was life like in your house?

CH: It was very busy. We had meals with sometimes twenty people – fifteen to twenty people - anyone who showed up. We ate with hired hands...sometimes neighbors down the street stopped by...in the summertime, a lot of the older school kids that we employed for the haying season. It was mass confusion at times and at other times, it was great...mostly great.

FH: Did you have milk from the cows?

CH: We had milk, we had meat and we had a huge vegetable garden that my grandfather was in charge of and my grandmother. We had a root cellar and we put out lots of canned vegetables. We had potatoes and squash and all those veggies. I remember going down into the basement to get all that stuff to get through the winter months.

FH: How did you prepare the house for the winter?

CH: Our house was pretty warm except we did not have heat upstairs. We had vents in the floor and we had a huge furnace that would heat most of the house. It had a vent or register on the floor that came up from the cellar. At one point, I guess when I was a small child, they had wood. When I was growing up, they used coal in the furnace. They would have to put plastic on some of the windows...they did not have storm windows, per se.

FH: What kind of duties did you have to do?

CH: The girls did not get as much as the farm work. My two sisters were not that interested. I was more interested in money at an early age and having a little allowance. I had a job at a very young age. I would go out in the barn where they had pales of milk. I would bring the milk to the bulk tank. I think I probably got 20 cents a night. It seemed like a big deal back then. It really taught me a work ethic that I always kept.

FH: When you were growing up, where did the children hang out?

CH: We did not have a community center like we do know. A lot of our community events or "get togethers" revolved around school and church. If we took part in sports, it was here in our school. Our parents would come after us...or cousin or some relative would come after us. Within the church, we belonged to the youth organization. We went on trips or we would gather that way...we would projects through the church.

FH: Where did you go to High School?

CH: I went two years in this building ¹...two years at Shelburne High School and two years at CVU.

FH: Where was your homeroom?

CH: My homeroom was downstairs where the Police are now on the northeast side of the building.

FH: What was like High School like? Did you have field trips? What were athletics/academics like?

CH: It is interesting because had two years here and two years at CVU. So the two years here at the high school...it was a neat place because everyone knew each other. All the families basically knew each other and everyone knew each other. Even the older kids...we all went to school in this one building...from first grade to twelve grade. The kids all watched out for each other. There were a lot of families who had children who were in high school and then they had second and third graders. There was this interconnection that is kind of missing now. I remember one French class...we only had twelve people in. We had small classes, knew the teachers. For the most part, if we wanted to be some sort of play or athletic sport, we could because there was such a small group of people. That changed when we went to CVU. I played two years on the basketball team...I wasn't that great because I was short. But when I went there, there was so many children, that you could not compete on that level. I ended up taking field hockey over at CVU. But it was that kind of thing where you really did not compete on your athletic ability...it was just to have a good time and enjoy each other's company. There wasn't the competitiveness that there is now.

FH: The sense of getting a grade was different, I am sure.

CH: We had some very very good teachers here and they were pretty strict.

FH: Who do you remember?

CH: I remember Mrs. McDonald...she was a French teacher. Mrs. Morriveau. She ended up marrying Mr. Blanchard – he taught for years at Essex. She was my English teacher. At CVU, I had a great History teacher, Mr. LaFreniere, whom I really enjoyed thoroughly.

FH: What were your favorite subjects?

CH: Latin, English and History.

¹ Village High School. The present day town offices.

FH: What were the school dances like? This was what year?

CH: It would have been in the early 1960s. I graduated High School in 1966. So it would have been 1962, 1964. When we were here, it was more like a community event because we had more people that knew each other and it was closer. It was difficult when we went to CVU because we had people we did not know. We had to very quickly try to mold into a class. Some of us did, some of us didn't do so well with that.

FH: What were some of the pranks that happened while you were at school?

CH: Probably, some of the things that happened during Halloween.... Cabbage night. Somebody drove an old car up on the Shelburne Inn's steps...I was not with them. Basically, it was just things like spraying windows. It was nothing malicious. We always used to throw pumpkins out on the road and stop traffic. It was nothing major. We used to go out...there was a whole group of us...a lot of the kids were from my church group. Of course, we never told our parents that. [laughter]

FH: What Church did you belong to?

CH: Saint Catherine's. When I was very small, we had Father Cain. Who had been there for a very long, long time.¹ After him, when I was involved with the youth groups, Father McDonough was the priest here. He was a priest here for a long time. He was from Stowe and he knew the Von Trapp family very, very well. He used to take kids on all kinds of trips and treks. Especially the altars boys. He used to - I don't know if it was red - have a convertible and he used to drive around. So we remember that. After that, there was Father Murtaugh...oh Monsignor Fradet was here. He was a great guy. He was actually here for a while and they went to Charlotte. He had two Parishes and went on to become a Monsignor. He had Christ the King until he died. He was a great family friend of ours and he actually married us and buried us all. In my grandmother's and grandfather's day. He was an interesting man.



¹ Father Cain served at Saint Catherine's Church in Shelburne from 1934-1953.

Figure 1 Saint Catherine's Church

FH: What did you do after Church?

CH: They had breakfast or get togethers after church. We got drafted by my grandmother who, I think, probably organized just about every dinner and event in town for a lot of the church functions. We used to have a lot of dinners – potluck dinners.

FH: What was her name?

CH: Her name was Rita. She actually taught school and she organized the PTO. She drove the school bus and was in a lot of different things. She was an organizer.

FH: Where did your father stand with these type of activities?

CH: The men did not do a whole lot outside the farm. The women certainly did.

FH: What were some of the events that brought the community together?

CH: The PTO used to be very, very active in putting on a lot of dinners. The church groups. We used to have dinners for town meeting. I trying to remember what events they were but several of us gals in my age group got drafted and we used to wait on tables and serve food in the old Town Hall. Downstairs, they had a great kitchen there. They used t hold a lot of the big dinners down there – the same with the church. One of the things that people will tell you, not just me...one of the things that was very social was the Korny Kapers as a kid.

FH: What was your involvement?

CH: As a child...I never played a starring role or anything...if they used school children for singing or different events, we participated in that.

FH: For those of us who doesn't know what Korny Kapers was, could you please tell us?

CH: It was an event, where mostly adults and using some children, got together on a yearly basis to put on a performance and the money went to the schools. Gus Mercaldo¹ was one of the first. He was very, very active in it. Anyone in that age group from of the late 1960s and 1970s will tell you that they all participated in the Korny Kapers. The Askes...the Picards...Gus...Ruth Morrow. There was a whole crew of people who took part in it. In the early days, it was held at Town Hall. That was always fun, because the kids got to go upstairs in the balcony and that was a big deal. It did get moved to the gymnasium because theatre it got so popular.

¹ See interview with Gus Mercaldo

FH: I remember some rather innovative lighting techniques. I remember a man suspended on the tip of a basketball backboard used as a lighting frame up there. You wondered who was up there and you did not want to sit under him. It was pretty scary.

CH: It was a big event for the school.

FH: Do you remember any big productions?

CH: It is funny, I don't remember one particular production. I do remember a group of men who were dressed up as women. They danced and did a skit. It was a hoot. Gus would be able to tell you. They kind of melded in. You remember the performances but you don't remember any particular one.

FH: You are the Town Clerk. You know everything that goes on in the town?

CH: There is a saying that the Town Clerk know where all the dead bodies are buried...it can be live bodies too.

FH: What did you find interesting about the job?

CH: There are a lot of interesting things... First, I guess, I was brought up...my grandmother was a schoolteacher and she instilled a great sense of history. That was one of my favorite subjects. Stories...the stories we used to here. Not only if my grandmother but I had a grandfather on my mother's side who had a very interesting background. We had a real sense of history and politics from him. I guess it is the fact that I am the custodian of some very important records. They are entrusted to me for a short time. That is a very, very important aspect of the job. The other part is that I enjoy the people...the contact. I enjoy dealing with people. The many challenges...organizing the elections. Trying to keep track of everything. This is very diverse job. You just don't come in and sit and do one thing day after day. On any one-day, there could be all kinds of things happening. There are so such great stories and different people who come in. It is just amazing. I probably have kept a journal because I could have written a good book when I retired.

FH: Tell us about your grandmother on your mother's side.

CH: She was from Shelburne. She was a Noonan. They were brought up in Shelburne Falls. They were an Irish family. They were here in the 1840s. My great grandfather owned a store and was a butcher in the old house, where you come down the bridge...on the right hand side. She taught school from the time she got out of school. She taught us...we did not have Kindergarten in those days...but she instilled a great a love of learning to us because she had a regimen where we would have to come in from playing for an hour every day. She would either read to us or ask us questions or give us projects to do. We had some good some background when we ended going to school in first grade. I went when I was five, I actually went a year younger than the most of

the children. We had a very solid background—especially phonics and reading. I owe that to here.

FH: She lived in the house on the east side or west side of the Bridge?

CH: She lived on the south side to the west of the bridge. Just before you come down to the falls. There is an old house there.

FH: You lived in another house?

CH: She lived with us. That is where she grew up. If you go up on to Thomas Road there is a curve where there is a large red farmhouse. It used to be called the Sunny Bend farm. My mother's father was an interesting man. He led, for twenty-four years, the Vermont Farm Bureau. In those days, it was a very politically active group of people. He was responsible for getting electricity out to the farmers, providing them with insurance. He did a lot of interesting projects. He traveled to Washington a lot. Some of the stories he used to tell of the people that he knew...I am reading the biography of President Truman...David McCullough. A lot of those names in there are a lot of the names are the names that my grandfather used to work with. The Aikens. George Aiken was a good friend of his. We used to go up there sometimes and he would be there.¹ Warren Austin who was the ambassador to the UN. Just people who were very neat people.

FH: What were some of the other significant families that you remember from growing up?

CH: The O'Briens. They were another farming family.² Most of the families that we knew were farming families. We grew up with them. Even our families – my father and mother, my grandparents – used to interact with them. The LaMothes – Father LaMothe that runs the Parish at Saint Catherine's. You can just go up and down the road. The Guilmettes were still here. The Barrs are still farming. The Bovats who had the garage that just had a fire on Webster Road.³ That is where we used to get our mechanical problems done. We grew up with the Snellings. They came to town and went to school with them. I went to school with the Webbs. Marshall Webb and I were in the same class and Kate Harris Webb.⁴ There were a number of people that we grew up with. That is just a small group of people.

FH: What do you remember of the Shelburne Museum?

CH: That started, I believe around 1948..1949..1950. We used to go on field trips there and that was a very big deal to be able to go to Shelburne Museum.

¹ George Aiken was the Lieutenant Governor from 1933-1937, Governor of Vermont from 1937-1941 and U.S. Senator from 1941 to 1975.

² See James and Pauline O'Brien interview

³ The garage, now owned by Larry Williams, burnt in January 2002

⁴ Marshall Webb is the great grandson of Seward and Lila Webb.

FH: Did they let you out of school when the Ti was brought to the museum?

CH: I was in third grade. I was with Mrs. DeCourval. I was one the West side of the building so every day we watched the boat come a little bit closer and closer. It was neat because we followed it the whole school year as to how far it was coming up through on the tracks. That was a pretty big thing. One of the nicest memories that a lot of people my age would remember was that we all went ice-skating underneath the bridge. They had a large pond there and that is where we would ice skate. The bridge by the museum. They would let us skate there.

FH: Do you remember when JFK was shot?

CH: I was in high school sitting in a civics class when they acme in and told us that.

FH: What happened then?

CH: We all started talking about it. People were crying. They were was a lot going on. We had a great teacher and he tried to derive a civics lesson f out of all that. What is going to happen next? What do you think is going to happen to our country?

FH: What were some of the major disasters that occurred in Shelburne?

CH: There was the hurricane in I believe 1957 and it did quite a bit of damage.

FH: What happened to your house?

CH: We lost the electricity and back then, it was really tough to get it back right away. Of course, with the farm, it was really tough because you had t have electricity for milking the cows. I remember that we had to take turns during those days because it was so difficult to manage without electricity.

FH: How many cows did you have?

CH: I think about 65. Back in those days, that was a lot.

FH: What were town meetings like? Especially when your grandfather arrived.

CH: That was my grandfather in Jericho but he was very active in Town affairs too. He served as the Town representative from Jericho for a couple of sessions in the legislature. My grandfather served as a Lister and an overseer of the poor during his time here. We used to go to Town Meeting as kids and help out with dinner. They were more like lunches.

FH: Where did they hold them?

CH: At the town hall. They had an open meeting which is a lot different then they are now. People would get up...the budgets were much easier to process...it was easier to manipulate them. Someone would get up and say "I don't think we need to have X amount of money for roads" and somebody else would say, "Well yeah, I think we need more money than what the budget bares." They would have these great kinds of conversations or discussions on the floor, which we are lacking now.

FH: And from that, policy would happen right then?

CH: Yes. And they would vote people in. If you were running for office, that was how you would run. There would not be a lot of politicking prior to that. You could stand up and say "I would nominate so an so" and somebody would say "I would nominate so and so for the same." And then there would be discussion and then they would take a vote.

FH: Would people stand up and defend their nomination?

CH: I remember being with my grandmother and somebody said "Don't nominate me...I don't want that damn job anyway." Sometimes people would get elected without really wanting it.. I think, for most part, people did want to run for office. They did have overseer of the poor, fence viewers, and weigher of the coals – all of these obscure, abstract jobs.

FH: What does a fence viewer a do?

CH: Stan resigned and they are picking somebody else. ¹ They go and mediate boundary disputes. The last one that Stan did that was quite interesting was the one down on Spear Street. The people up on Martindale had a problem with the farmer who had the farm next to the cemetery up on Spear Street. The largest and most interesting one that he dealt with.

FH: So Town meeting went all day?

CH: Sometimes. Basically, it was during the day... Ruth Morrow could tell you some great stories about Town Meetings. ²

FH: Do you know of any Shelburne ghost stories?

¹ Stan Wilbur was Shelburne's Fence Viewer from 1983-2001. He lives at Harbor Crossing.

² Ruth Irish Morrow's family has lived in the same brick house at the corner of Falls Road and Spear Street since 1852. The family first moved to Shelburne c. 1811. Truman Webster said of the family "There really isn't another family in town who has lived in the same spot, day in and day out, for as long as the Irish family" (Shelburne News, August 13, 1991)

CH: I don't but some people have told me about them. I do know that the brick house that Moe Harvey owns now and was Harry Claytons, was a stop on the Underground Railroad.¹

We talk about community now but community then was much different. You basically knew most of the families that were here. There was this sense of caring and obligation to help people out. Whether it came from the churches... yes maybe you helped out people in your congregation or your faith...but it transcended that because you were helping out people from all faiths. I think one of the unique examples of that if there was a death in the family. Back then, they held these wakes for the most part. People who died when I was a child or in high school...they held these huge Irish wakes. They were people that would come and everyone would bring a dish. You never have worry about food. Honestly, It was almost a social event. It was this whole sense of community, closeness and caring and consideration for other people. It is present some times. Like the father the doctor just had at Beaver Creek – he was talking about the caring and the community. It happens when there is an event like that. It was really evident every day. There was something that really brought people together. The fireman used to have a banquet or a ball or a dance. The whole community would come out to involve themselves instead of just writing a check, they would all come and participate in it. The participation was so important because you go to know your neighbors. Even new people who moved to town. I remember when the Snellings moved to town and other people. There was this sense of wanting to know who your neighbors were and wanting to get them involved...being a good neighbor...which is not evident as much now. I think that, in essence, was the important thing about living during those times.

FH: Were there Dutch elms in Shelburne?

CH: Yes. If you look at some old pictures of Shelburne along Route 7, you see those magnificent trees. They were all over – especially in the village area. It was pretty barren after they were cut down.



Figure 2 John Tracy

¹ Moe Harvey owns the brick home that is next to Gillian's Restaurant.

There were some really interesting characters around. John Tracy. John Tracy was the Tracy/Maeck family. He was a great old guy. A lot of the village kids were employed by him...he had a large garden out by where the Village Vale is. A lot of the kids worked for him. He was a wonderful old guy. He used to come up to the school and tell us stories. He was kind of our.... to a small child, he was an old man but he was the sense of history to the community.¹ There was a Walter Ball. He was an interesting old guy. He had the sawmill down by the bridge across the road from Ed "Tut" Coleman.² He had great stories too. He lived alone in this shack and sawed wood. My grandmother used to invite him for dinner...once he came, he would tell us stories. He would ask him "Why are you next to the river with the sawmill? How do you get the logs? Why are doing that?" He used to give us the whole scenario of how the logs are cut and how they have to be planed. It was interesting. A lot of those were real life lessons to use as we went on in life. And they were told, not because we needed the information, it was conversation during a meal or conversation from juts visiting. There were some characters then.

¹ John Jay Tracy (1884-1974). He was the son of Julius and Hannah Tracy. John Tracy was also the brother of Hannah Edgerton Tracy who married Benjamin Harris Maeck. Benjamin Harris Maeck was a member of the Cemetery Commission (1929-1937; 1944-1947); Captain, Shelburne Volunteer Fire Department (1940s-1950s); Town Representative (1925-1927) and Town Notary.

² Walter Ball owned his 4-½ acres of land from 1928 to 1966. In 1966, Edward and Janice Coleman purchased the land.