

Interviewee: Robert Noonan
Interviewer: Pamela Daly
Date: March 13, 2002
Location: 1116 Falls Road

Robert Noonan is third generation Noonan to live in Shelburne.

Topics discussed: Shelburne Falls, Shelburne Schools, mills, Noonan Family, horse racing, slaughterhouses, Webb family, bridges and roads, Depression, out of state travel

Pamela Daly: What is your name?

Robert Noonan: R.J. Noonan or Robert. It does not make any difference.

PD: What is your age?

RN: 71

PD: For how many generations have the Noonans been in Shelburne?

RN: Well, let' see. If goes back to my grandparents, my parents and myself, so three generations. I think before that, I think the first...and I have to check this up...I think my grandfather's father would be Dan Noonan. I think very possibly he might have lived in Hinesburg, but I have to go over and check that out. He would have come from Ireland and from there, we don't know and I am trying to find out.

PD: Why did your family move to the Shelburne area?

RN: I have no idea.

PD: Did the move to the Falls area?

RN: I am not so sure that they originally...some of my relatives had a farm over here in East Shelburne. They also had a farm over by Shelburne Pond.

PD: Over by where Claude LaPierre has a farm?

RN: Yes, but a little further. Of course, that could have been possibly been Dan Noonan but I am not sure.

PD: Dan Noonan would be your grandfather?

RN: Great grandfather.

PD: So when did the Noonans settle in the Falls area?

RN: My grandfather and my grandmother lived in the house next door.

PD: The Kitty Noonan house?

RN: Yeah, the Kitty Noonan house. She was my aunt. I can't tell you when they moved in there but I would say perhaps around the turn of the century. 1900 or a little bit before.

PD: You were mentioning the basement of this house before?

RN: Yes. In the basement, my grandfather had a store. You can see, where the garage is now, there would be a door where you would go into the store.

PD: And he sold sausage from beef slaughtered in your barn....

RN: Yes. They would slaughter the pigs and they would slaughter the cows out there. Right where this house is, there was a barn. This was where, wherever you would get the animals from, you would keep them in here. Before the execution. Plus the fact, he would keep his horses in here too before the time of automobiles. They would go back and forth by horses.

PD: Did he run a livery stable?

RN: Not at all. He did have racehorses...harness horses.

PD: This was your grandfather?

RN: This is my grandfather. John Noonan. He had harness horses. But you have to realize that it was not big time. They would just race the people in surrounding towns. The winners would get a blanket or something. One of the racetracks used to up right where the Teddy Bear factory is now. My father worked for J. Watson Webb...riding to the house. He was a groomsmen- taking care of the horses. My uncle Ray worked there. My uncle Ray ended up being the farm manager at the Bostwicks for many years.

PD: So he ran the Noonan Dairy barns over there?

RN: Yes. But as a young man, he worked for the Webbs down on Long Island training foals for them. When I say training...he was not training, he was grooming them, taking care of them, feeding them and all that.

PD: Where were you born?

RN: At Bishop DeGoesBriand in Burlington. My family lived up there. We didn't move here...my dad off and one lived in Shelburne...actually, all my life, I remember living in Shelburne. We moved to Burlington when I was going into my junior year of high school so I could go to Cathedral High School instead of Shelburne High School. Sometime, in the very early 1960's...it might have been '63 I think, my father built this house down here for me. The house next door was his house { towards the creek}. That land belonged to the Episcopal Church but he bought it and built a house there.

PD: Were the roads paved around here when you were growing up?

RN: Oh yeah, they were. Right for here. I am trying to think where they were not paved....I will give you an example. They were not paved over Shelburne harbor. From Bay Road on, they were not paved. From what I read in history, this was the main route to Burlington until they built Route 7. They did not have Route 7 then. I think one reason it was because it was the bridging you had to put over the LaPlatte. I think they eventually put a road where Kwiniaska is. That way your are avoiding the bridge.

PD: Webster Road?

RN: Yep.

PD: What did you parents do when you were growing up?

RN: My father mainly was ait's a fancy name...a bread salesman. What he did was drive a bread truck. They called them bread salesman and they did actually sell. He would deliver the bread and take the order for the next day.

PD: Where did he deliver to?

RN: He had various routes. One time it was Addison County and other times it was up around Washington County and all that. Very seldom did he ever deliver in Chittenden (County) or in the city. Then eventually, when I was in high school, he got a chance to go to work as a lightning rod salesman. Within a few months, he bought the business out. As an older man, he had a bad heart. He always wanted to be a policeman – he was turned down by the State Police. He was hired and the day before he was to go on duty, the State Police said “Gee, we can't take you, you don't have a high school education.” He ended up as a guard at the museum and then he

ended up as Head of Security at the museum. In fact that is where he died... right where the old waterwheel is. My father did everything front row. When he died, he was going to die where every body could see him. Surrounded by his dogs. He had these German Shepherds. We used to have horses and that barn was full of horses. Right out here. That was a hobby with him. He trained the horses and then he worked over at the museum. An then eventually he sold the horses because the doctor wanted to because of his heart and then within less than a month, he started buying German Shepherds and starting training them.

PD: Could you tell us a little more about your schooling?

RB: I went to school here in Shelburne and then as a junior I went to Cathedral High School.

PD: The Village School?

RN: Yes. In those days, it had 1through 12. After high school, I went to Saint Michaels. After that, I went into the army for two years and then I started teaching for four years in North Bennington. From 1959 to 1996, I taught at Rice. In 1996, I returned but I am back. For example, this week I will be back 4 out of five days as a substitute.

PD: What do you teach?

RN: Anything they want me to. This week has been fun because I have been doing Home Economics which I have done. What I really specialize in is that most subs don't want to go in for 2 or 3 periods a day and I don't mind. So I do that. Today, a teacher had to leave because her daughter got sick so I had to take her classes. If I hadn't, I would have gone skating at Cairns. Tomorrow, I will be up there and afterwards I will very possibly go skiing up at Trapps. In the warmer months, I play golf. I always tie everything in with going up there.

PD: When did you first start living here?

RN: I would say '63 or '64.

PD: Were there any old structures by the Fall when you arrived?



Photo 1 Shelburne Falls Sawmill

RN: Walter Ball, right down on the other side, had a sawmill. When I was growing up, you had a mill down that road (north on Creek). That mill was torn down and Mrs. Webb used a lot of that material...the mill was just about fallen down anyways...to build the horseshoe type barn where she keeps the carriages over at the Shelburne Museum. If you go down there...I have not gone down there since they built that fancy house...but if you go down there....you would see...past where the mill was...there was a house for the mill keeper and all that. They had a dam down there. The dam, I think, went out in the 1927 flood. As you go out. You will notice that there is a steep bank there...the water would come up where the flat is. I guess people used to go out fishing in the night.

PD: Where was the dam?

RN: It was a quarter mile north up the creek .

PD: The river was much higher then?

RN: It was because of the dam.

PD: Did the dam ever freeze up? Did you go skating?

RN: Oh yeah. In fact, not in recent years because I skate on the artificial ice, but my mother and father used to have skating parties down there on the river. It depends on how much snow you get. Luckily, the river is not too deep.

PD: Do you know anything about the house right across the street? It has a very deep basement.

RN: I don't know, but I would not be surprised that at one time it was once a store. The house next door...my cousin Kerry owns it...and his wife Brenda tried to look up information on it in the Town Clerk's office. They don't know exactly when it was

built. The house next to the purple house, they also owned. That was my Uncle Johnnie's house. That house is so old that they cannot find information on it either.

PD: What else do you remember about growing up here in the Falls area?

RN: I grew up mainly during the war years. I lived two houses up there on the left. My grandfather had a house...this would be my mother's father...on that side, over where the Oakes live now. We used to go swimming in the river. When I got old enough to ride a bicycle, I then went to the lake. My mother was never too crazy about me swimming in the river. In those days we swam in the same place where people swim today. The town did not run the beach – you would go down and go swimming.

PD: How did you travel on bigger trips?

RN: We always drove. I laugh, because now my wife and I are into taking the train. For example, our son lives in the Boston area, and during vacation, we took a train to New York and back. I need to rectify that. I used to take the train. When was a teenager and able to go out on my own, I would go over to the station here and the train would come through, and for 25 cents, I would catch the train into Burlington and then catch it back. My family never took the train – they were always automobile.

PD: Even though it was rural Vermont, everyone had cars...

RN: When I was a kid, you tell somebody that you were Shelburne, they would look for the cow manure on your shoes. Now people who live in Chittenden County claim that they live in Shelburne because it is the place to live. On the other side of the river there, where Freddy Thomas was. He was my uncle. He married my father's sister, Rita Mom. ¹ When we first moved down here, he kept all his cows out here because he had his farm up on the corner there. You could hear them in the morning.

PD: How was the village affected during the Depression?

RN: My father always had a job...as a bread salesman, but he was a heck of a salesman. I remember my uncle Johnny who lived up next to the purple house there...I remember sometimes he wouldn't be working and then he would be all excited that he got a job. Then eventually, right at the tail end of the Depression, he got a job and he stayed there for the rest of his life taking care of the cows over at the Bostwick farm. My uncle Ray probably got him the job because he was over there. My Uncle Ray's son, Terry, owns the house back there and he owns three homes around here. I won this house and the house next door.

¹ See Colleen Haag Interview

