

**Interviewee: David Palmer**  
**Interviewer: Cathy Townsend**  
**Date: February 21, 2002**  
**Location: Palmer Sugar House, Hinesburg Road**

**David Palmer's ancestors have called Shelburne home since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. For the last 75 years, the immediate Palmer family have been involved in Maple Sugaring at Palmers Sugar House.**

**Topics discussed: Maple Sugaring, The Ticonderoga, Shelburne Museum, Old Palmer Schoolhouse, fur trapping, Shelburne Farms, Shelburne Falls, Eutie Thomas, Woodsmen Hall**

Cathy Townsend: How long have you lived in Shelburne?

David Palmer: Oh, about forty years.

CT: And we should probably say how long your father lived in Shelburne.

DP: My father was born in Shelburne in 1907. My mother was 1908. He was born in Shelburne Falls.

CT: Do you know when he moved to Burlington?

DP: 1919

CT: And then did he come back to Shelburne eventually?

DP: Well, no he came back to Hinesburg, close by. About 100 yards south of border!

CT: When and where were you born?

DP: I was born in Burlington...1944.

CT: The name of your parents?

DP: Marjorie and Lawrence.

CT: Where did your parents go to school?

DP: Boy, my father went to school in Shelburne for a time, he went to Burlington High School for a time, and he went the University of Vermont. I guess that just about it covers it.

CT: Do you know what school he went to in Shelburne?

DP: Boy, it had to be before the Village School, so I would assume it was probably the New Palmer Schoolhouse because my grandmother taught in the Old Palmer Schoolhouse is 1898.<sup>1</sup>



**Photo 1 Palmer Schoolhouse**

CT: What did your parents do for a living?

DP: My father was a Funeral Director and my mother was a housewife.<sup>2</sup>

CT: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

DP: Sure, I have one brother and one sister.

CT: Where do they live?

DP: One brother is homeless... no he's not really homeless...he is building a home in Hinesburg, he's been building it for four years. He lives in Alburg right now. My sister lives in Delaware.

CT: What prompted you to move to Shelburne?

DP: Family had a farm since 1858 or 1859, indirectly and directly since, well I'm not sure of the exact dates, but my grandmother's father had the farm right around the corner here so it was an opportunity. Maybe because I wasn't a team player and... I just loved the outdoors and animals at the time, so that was probably what pushed me to moving out here.

CT: Do you have a first memory of Shelburne?

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Peet Palmer was married to Walter Fonda Palmer and she taught at the school at the turn of the century.

<sup>2</sup> Corbin and Palmer Funeral Home on South Union Street in Burlington.

DP: The first memory I ever had of Shelburne I used to come with my father because he owned a farm even though he always had hired help to work the farm, and we used to come out here to watch the ball games on TV because we didn't have a TV and the hired man did. That was my first memory. It was a dirt road.

CT: Was this your first home in Shelburne, have you been in the same place?

DP: Yeah I've been in the same place.

CT: Do you have any thoughts on how the town has changed in the period of time that you've been here?

DP: Yeah, it's not as personable as they used to be. I mean, years ago, you know, you knew everybody, I mean that's everywhere not just Shelburne. I don't consider it as friendly of a place as it was when I was a kid, but there's different types of people, and it's more like city community anyway. I mean, that's what it looks like to me. Agriculture was a big thing in Shelburne years ago and you knew everybody who farmed and you went over and played cards with everybody. I mean his father and mother {points to someone in room} I used to go over and play cards with every Friday night with, and his father had a farm over on Cheese Factory Road. I knew Henry Webster down on Thomas Road, and I used to go down there and visit with him. He was famous in Shelburne.<sup>1</sup> And Eutie Thomas, of course everybody knew Eutie Thomas; I used to play cards with all these people. They all had great stories. Eutie used to come up here periodically, three or four times right up until he was ninety-five years old. I had a rocking chair, I still have it, he'd sit in the rocking chair. He'd drive up and he'd scare everybody to death. He used to say, "I can't see and I can't hear" and he'd drive up there. He would sit and visit for you know for an hour. Once and a while there, I think that is when he was escaping from his caregiver. And before that one of his daughters would drive him up and he would come up and visit. That was his big thing. You know, sugaring has always been a fun thing.

CT: Did your father ever say what life was like at home?

DP: Yeah, a few memories I have of his childhood. He owned a dairy farm, he always had hired help because it was his father's, and his father had gotten it from his wife's father. But, before that when they had the mill he said before he went to school, he had to milk six cows by hand. He said he always hated cows after that. But he always had a dairy farm even though he didn't actually milk the cows himself.

CT: Did he ever say how close his nearest neighbor was?

DP: Well, he had an uncle, George Palmer, who lived on; I think it's the Richmond Barr<sup>2</sup> Farm. George Palmer owned the Richmond Barr farm its on Pond Road, and he used to go over every summer and work for him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry and Alice Webster owned a 190-acre farm on the Charlotte/Shelburne town line on Spear Street extension.

<sup>2</sup> See Richmond Barr Interview

CT: That's his closest neighbor?

DP: Well no. He was born in Shelburne Falls, and he used to work every summer for his uncle, but his closest neighbor had to be pretty close because if you go across that bridge in Shelburne Falls, that little bridge, you go up the hill, there is several new houses but there was a big white house on the right side, there is a little smaller house just before it they built a few years ago and then the next house is that big white house. That's where he was born, in that house. The mill of course was right on the river. I can remember him telling a lot of stories about neighbors but I can't ...you know you just don't pay much attention. The stories were nice then, but I forget things that happened yesterday.

CT: Did he say how he heated the house?

DP: I imagine it was wood, everybody did.

CT: And how he kept the house lit?

DP: Got me, but I know in Burlington, as a kid they used coal so I imagine it was wood in Shelburne. We're talking about 1919, I'm not quite sure of the dates there you know, but I know when he was born. His father sold the mill, I guess it was 1919. I had a calendar somebody gave me the other day from the gristmill. One edge was ripped off, but they found it in the old Jim O'Brien House down there on Dorset Street.<sup>2</sup> The guy was remodeling and they found it in the partition, and he brought it over. Pretty neat.

CT: Do you have a favorite season?

DP: Oh, of course, spring. Sugaring! That's the favorite season. For the whole family it's the favorite season. It's been a tradition we've passed on. My mother did it, I've done it and my nephews taking interest in it, so it just goes on. I don't know, something about it, once it gets in your blood you just have to do it.

CT: Do you know how your father got to school?

DP: I would assume walk. I knew his mother. She used to call me every day.

Someone else in the room screams: He did walk! Gramps used to tell me stories about walking to school.

CT: Did he go to church?

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<sup>1</sup> George and Frances Palmer, who married in 1894, lived on a 140-acre farm that they received from Eli Palmer in 1895. The also had 16 acres that they received from the Lucy Peet Farm in 1919. George Palmer (1868-1945) was a Cemetery Commissioner and Select board member for Shelburne during the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> See James and Pauline O'Brien interview

DP: Well, knowing my grandmother I'll betcha he did. She was a schoolteacher. I know in his later years he always went to church but he was a funeral director, you know. You know the church I remember him going to mostly was in Burlington, the First Methodist Church.



**Picture 1 Methodist Church, Burlington, Vermont**

CT: What do you remember or if you want to tell what your fathered remembered about Shelburne Falls.

DP: The one story that has stuck with me all my life. My father always was a practical joker. If you said "don't tell anybody, well you were in trouble. So, one story that always stuck in my mind, all my life was that, I don't know if you know them, they just died recently too, you know the Harrington's Antiques Shop, well Henrietta Panettieri lived there.<sup>1</sup> Every time my father saw her, especially when there were a lot of people out, he would announce to everybody about Henrietta shooting the minister...that Henrietta shot the minister next door. The minister was in the backyard writing his sermon and Henrietta had a .22 or some gun, and was target practicing next door and shot him, but not intentionally, but he made it sound like it was intentionally and he would always tell everybody "Henrietta shooting the minister". I always remembered that all my life. We used to go down and bring her syrup down to her and immediately that was the first thing he would always bring up with her, shooting the minister in Shelburne.

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<sup>1</sup> Henrietta Panettieri lived on 23.4 acres that belonged to her grandmother, Blanche Harrington. She also owned 96 acres of land north of Harbor Road that she gave to the Nature Conservancy in 1988.



**Photo 2 Shelburne Falls**

CT: Do you remember what businesses there were in Shelburne Falls?

DP: You mean forty years ago or hundred years ago?

CT: Either one.

DP: Well, the businesses I used to stop and visit with were like Little's Grocery Store, basically because their son was a friend of mine, Glen Little, he lives right near Shelburne he's right on the border I think in Charlotte. Russell and Martha Little, they had this store and of course you know it was a little teeny store in there. You hit the stop sign, you go by Galipeau's, you hit the stop sign, and you take a right. There's a little apartment house there but it used to be a grocery store. I used to go in and visit with Russell all the time.<sup>1</sup> Of course Galipeau's, everyone knew Frank Galipeau. I know my father talked about the butcher.

CT: Do you know of the Shelburne Falls Progressives?

DP: Are they communists or what?

CT: Must have been a long time ago.

DP: The Shelburne Falls Progressives? Never heard of them.

CT: How about the Woodmen Hall?

DP: They had a fire up there. My father played basketball upstairs. They had a gym and I think it was a pot bellied stove right in the middle of it if I remember correctly, and their biggest rival was Hinesburg.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Russell and Martha Little bought their land on the west side of Falls Road in 1947 and they sold it in 1974.

<sup>2</sup> The Modern Woodmen of America is a fraternal life insurance organization that was founded in 1883 by Joseph Cullen Root in Lyons, Iowa. Root envisioned a self-governing society whose members came from local camps (lodges) across America. The lodge system, which remains in effect today, nurtures community spirit by bringing families together for wholesome, social, recreational and service activities. (source: [www.modern-woodmen.org](http://www.modern-woodmen.org))

CT: Was there a feeling that Shelburne Falls was separate from the village?

DP: I think so. I have that feeling because all the stories I hear have Shelburne and Shelburne Falls.



**Photo 3 Shelburne Falls**

CT: Do you know anything of the Union Poor Farm?

DP: I think it used to be down on Thompson Point.

CT: Do you know who the large families from Shelburne were?

DP: Are you talking about weight wise? (He laughs) Of course, everybody knew the Thomases. Their family was spread out; it wasn't even just one family. Of course everybody knows them, Colleen is the town clerk. There was Colleen and she had a twin sister, and then she had another sister, then she had Sean and Dan her brothers, but their father had a brother, Eutie Thomas<sup>1</sup> is related to them, Archie Thomas. That was a fairly large family in Shelburne.

CT: Do you know who the big landowners were in Shelburne?

DP: Obviously, the Webbs were at one time the, but before the Webbs there were lots of different individual landowners down on the lake. All the farms were bought out by the Webb Estate. I have a great story from when I was a teenager. Myself, a friend of mine, and a girlfriend, we were like sixteen or seventeen years old, we were out on a boat and we got caught in a storm out there; it was the worst storm of the year. The storm went on and we crashed onto to Shelburne Point at like two or three o'clock in the morning, I had no idea where, we were because we were teenagers you know. We went

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<sup>1</sup> See Colleen Haag interview. Eustace Thomas came to Shelburne with his parents in 1901. He went to high school at Saint Michaels in Winooski. Eustace served the community in a multitude of ways. Eustace Thomas served on the school board from 1929 to 1961 and he also served as Shelburne's Town Representative in 1961. He and his wife, Lena, ran a farm (the former Andrews Farm) near the junction of Spear Street and Thomas Road. Over the years, the farm grew to over 550 acres and it had over 400 apple trees.

over to Essex, NY, I think on Sunday or something, probably to purchase some illegal alcohol, chances are, because you couldn't buy it in Vermont on Sunday or you had to be twenty one and we weren't. I think there was a place, the Coffee Pot, over there. This little old lady would sell it to an infant, and we thought that was pretty tricky so anyway we got caught in the storm, the motor broke down and we coasted all night and at around 2:00, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning we crashed into Shelburne Point. We staggered up to this brick house, you know, and we had no idea where we were, beat on the door. This guy came out with a smoking robe there, and we asked if we could use the phone and he said fine and he let us in the house, he showed us where the phone was, and he went back to bed, and I'm looking, the house is all filled with antiques and stuff. We called up and the state police came to get us and I still had no idea where I was. The next day my father brought us back to get the boat because the weather had cleared up. We were at Sam Webb's front doorstep just about. Sam had a big garage down there full of Kodiak Bears and Polar Bears every bear you could think of. So he gave us a tour of his Big Game Club or whatever that is in that garage down there. So I always remembered that about that part of the Webb's Estate.



**Photo 4 Webb Estate.**

**Photo Courtesy of UVM Special Collections**

CT: Do you remember some memorable personalities that used to live in Shelburne?

DP: Henry Webster was real memorable. He was a trapper at one time. He was just an all around hellion all his life. I can always remember, he told me the year before he died, as a kid they used to always trap and he used to tell me, you know, trapping as a kid towards Burlington, then back around down through Charlotte. He had a little dairy farm down there on Thomas Road. He was a character that everybody knew. Of course you had the Sutton Boys, down there on Dorset Street. They had a farm down there, two old bachelors. They were there forever. Most of the people from Shelburne that were from years ago were all into agriculture. A neat story about the Sutton boys - Walter and Jim. I remember one time poor old, I'm not sure if it was Walter or Jim, one



was a short stocky guy and one was tall. They were brothers but they were opposites. One of them was out bailing hay, and they always used to wear these bib overalls but they never wore nothing under them. They were bailing some and he went to pick the bail up and the strap got caught and yanked his bib overalls off, and he was walking down the highway with nothing on trying to get home.<sup>1</sup>

CT: What do you think is the most beautiful natural areas of Shelburne?

DP: They were, but then Burlington used to be a pretty town, you know its progress. It depends on what you're used to and what you like. Well you know the farms towards the lakes, Shelburne Farms, they are very picturesque. Of course, we like our own woods. Anyplace that's not developed is picturesque to me, but that's unrealistic too. That's what my lawyer tells me, your unrealistic life goes on, but it's my life though.

CT: What kind of wildlife have you seen around town?

DP: Oh god, I've seen every animal you could imagine, all except for a camel and Charlie Hubbard, one time, was going to buy me one. Said he was going to Egypt...he was an architect that lived down on Irish Hill Road...he is dead now. He used to come and visit all the time.<sup>2</sup> He felt that I needed a came. He was going to bring one back. He never did but he always said that. I have seen bear...any animal...deer...fox...coyotes. I even saw a wolf here one time here. Years ago, I had four hundred sheep and I sued to trap the coyotes which just became prevalent in the last twenty years and now they are everywhere. Coyotes are opportunists and with my sheep, I had this hate thing for coyotes. I used to set traps for coyotes from all the way from over here all the way around. I probably caught fifty of them out there. Back then it was acceptable – everyone wore fur coats. Obviously you had to skin the animals to get the fur coat. I remember bringing hides to with Henry Webster, a fellow from Williston, over to New Champlain, New York and sell the hides to a fur dealer which coyotes were worth twenty dollars or something. He kept going through them. He came to this one hide and he kept asking “where did catch get it? Where did you catch it?” When I shot the thing, I said “This is the strangest looking coyote I ever seen.” About a year later, I was looking in a magazine and on the front cover; they were showing pictures of wolves and this thing looked exactly like a wolf. I have seen bear, bobcat, lynx...I saw a lynx not to long ago. If you go over near Shelburne Pond, you see a lot of lynx. Even in our woods, I saw a bear once. I saw a bear running across the road just down the road here a little bit. Moose...any kind of small animal Never seen a poisonous snake here in Shelburne. Saw one that I thought was poisonous. Never seen a snake like that. It was up on Longmeadow. I went up there one Sunday, captured it and let it go behind the police station. They thought they were pretty funny sending me up there after it on a Sunday, so I went up there, brought it back and let it go. I was telling one of the officers there, Leblanc who used to be patrol man there, but he isn't anymore...they have a

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Sutton and Walter A. Sutton owned two significantly sized farms: a 112 acre Dorset Street farm that they received from Mary Noonan in 1943 and a 120 acre farm, known as the “John and Mary Higgins Farm” which sits on both sides of Dorset Street.

<sup>2</sup> Charles and Oda Hubbard owned 233 acres on Spear Street and Irish Hill Road. The coupled acquired the land from Walter Maeck in 1963 and A. Fleischmann in 1957.

picnic table out back... Leblanc used sit out there and eat his lunch. I brought the snake that nobody knew what it was and I let it go there by the picnic table. When I told the dispatcher and they asked what I did with the snake, I said, "I let it go there by the picnic table". She said, "What happens if the snake is poisonous?" I said "How do we know if the snake is poisonous, or not? If Leblanc is dead by the picnic table, then we know it is poisonous." They had a lot of learn sending me out that door anyways.

CT: Did your father ever tell you of any disasters in Shelburne?

DP: I think by the time they had they had the big flood that wiped out Richmond, I think they lived in Burlington by then. There is a story about a gravel pit collapsing and killing some of the town employees. I can't quite put together in my mind what exactly the deal was.

CT: That's pretty big

DP: For Shelburne. There weren't many people in Shelburne. I remember a picture of my grandmother when she was a teacher. I am pretty sure it was the Old Palmer Schoolhouse, which is on Irish Hill Road on the right. Right on the corner here of Irish Hill Road and Pond Road, there used to be the old Palmer Schoolhouse...a brown schoolhouse. Miraculously, it burned up and it got pushed away.

CT: Did your father or you know of any famous visitors to Shelburne?

DP: Not that I know. He always used to talk about George Peet, his uncle. He was a fur trapper. The Vermont fur trappers sent him to Washington to give Eleanor Roosevelt a fur coat. He had to take the train. When he came back, they were all excited to get all the information about Eleanor Roosevelt and dealing with the president. The only thing that he could talk about was that on the train, he met a bunch of salesman playing poker and he skinned them all. That was the biggest thing. He could care less about delivering a fur coat to Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>1</sup>

CT: Do you remember anything from the early days of the Shelburne Museum?

DP: I could tell you some stories but I better not. I remember some certain people who stole a bus and left it in the middle of Church Street one time. I remember going down and watching the "Ticonderoga" being moved. I remember riding on the "Ticonderoga". We had a camp down on Thompson Point and I can remember, right around from our camp, there used to be a stone dock and the "Ticonderoga" used to

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<sup>1</sup> George and Clara Peet owned quite a bit of land in the Shelburne area. They owned a large 200+ acre farm that was on the Shelburne/St. George town line that eventually grew to 536 acres with major acquisitions in 1912 and 1924. This farmstead was originally the John Noonan, Sr. farm. The Peets also owned 200+ acre farm at the corner of Dorset Street and Hinesburg Road on the Charlotte/Shelburne town line. In 1917, John Peet donated the Lucy Peet farm (236 acres) to the Friends of Homeless Women. The Peets also own land in the Shelburne Falls area, which they sold to J.V.S. Maack.

dock there. I remember riding on it and I remember it was a big deal when they were moving it to the Shelburne Museum.



**Photo 5 Moving of the "Ti".**

**Photo courtesy of UVM Special Collections**

CT: They are turning that path into a trail. People can read about the history along the way...

DP: Don't tell me about it, I already know about it. I work for the town. I was working for Paul Goodrich part time. I would go down there and mow the parks and the ball fields. Somebody said, "Why don't you mow that Ti trail." So I went down there, put on the brush hog and mowed a heck of a trail. People were calling up the Town Manager being mad. Apparently, one end of it is right through people's property. So they were not impressed about that.

CT: Do remember any of the buildings being dismantled and rebuilt at Shelburne Museum?

DP: I do, but...I know one time, I had a hearse...a horse driven hearse and sled. I offered to give it to them but they did not want it. They said that it was kind of grotesque. Then a few years down the line, they wanted it and I wouldn't give it up. I still have it.

CT: Do you know of any Shelburne ghost stories?

DP: No. Some people believe in ghosts. I don't particularly believe in them. I have seen some strange things. I used to live...where I live...my grandmother's brother and sister killed themselves when they were kids. That is just down the road. I used to see people around but it could be anything...I used to drink a lot too {laughter} I am not the only person who saw them.

CT: The house that you live in now, did you build it?

DP: No, I was the second one. It was built in 1942. The original house...the farmhouse was burnt to the ground...who knows how...they used to have a woodstove...that generally what torched these houses. The one I lived in was built in 1942...my son lives in it now. Even though I am a resident of Shelburne, I took care of my mother the last couple years of her life at her house. We did not know how long my mother was going to live. My son had an apartment and we made a deal because my house was empty and falling down. He said, "I will fix it up."

CT: What was your first job when you moved to Shelburne?

DP: When I moved to Shelburne? I had a dairy farm. I took over the family farm.

CT: Where else have you worked?

DP: I was about 20 years old when I came to that. Before that, I worked in a factory one time for a while. I was, generally, a lifetime student before that

CT: Do you know what happened to the mills at Shelburne Falls?

DP: I have no idea.

CT: Do you remember any stories about the Shelburne Shipyard?

DP: Nope.

CT: Do you know of any other large maple sugaring operations in the Shelburne area?

DP: Eutie Thomas<sup>1</sup> on Thomas Road had one for a while. He is dead now. He had a big sugar works. Of course, all dairy farmers had maples and sugared to help pay their taxes.

CT: What products do you provide with the maple syrup?

DP: Maple syrup, maple sugar, maple cream, maple candy. George Deavitt had a sugaring outfit for quite a few years too.<sup>2</sup>

CT: How long has your family been involved with sugaring?

DP: Since 1858. My immediate family –mother, father and myself – it has been since 1930. But before that, grandmother's brothers...it goes back and back. By our old sugarhouse in the woods, there used to be an old beech tree right beside the front door.

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<sup>1</sup> Eustace Thomas came to Shelburne with his parents in 1901. He went to high school at Saint Michaels in Winooski. Eustace served the community in a multitude of ways. Eustace Thomas served on the school board from 1929 to 1961 and he also served as Shelburne's Town Representative in 1961. He and his wife, Lena, ran a farm (the former Andrews Farm) near the junction of Spear Street and Thomas Road. Over the years, the farm grew to over 550 acres and it had over 400 apple trees.

<sup>2</sup> George and Alberta Deavitt owned a plot of land on Irish Hill Road that they inherited from Orris and Grace Knight.

It fell over a few years ago, but as a kid I can remember looking and even up to ten years ago and seeing where they carved the dates, their initials and dates...eighteen something. The Peets. My grandmother was a Peet and the Peets were around Hinesburg Road especially. They had farms everywhere...even where Champlain Lanes is.

CT: You transported the sugar by horses....

DP: We used horses, than tractors and now we use vacuum pumps.

CT: How has the sugaring industry evolved over the years?

DP: It has become more technical. Sugaring is a labor-intensive business so you would have to be more technical. People don't seem to have the time, not just for sugaring, but for anything. Before, people were a lot more laid back. We always have lots of people stopping by and people would pitch in. Put the buckets up together and sap was always great fun. That was before TV I guess. Now everybody goes to their computer.

CT: Have you been recognized for your sugaring?

DP: Up until lately. A lot of people in sugaring are on a mission to get a "Point of Origin" label put on a maple syrup can seeing that 95% of syrup called Vermont Maple syrup is Canadian syrup. The State Agricultural department is not enforcing the laws. It is just a thing that is wrong...it is illegal. It is a hundred of millions dollar business.