
Marsh-Billings
National Historical Park
Woodstock, Vermont

Rockefeller Family Oral History

July 1995

LR Laurance Rockefeller
MR Mary Rockefeller
JH Janet Houghton
JB Jane Beck
Date July 24, 1995
Place Woodstock, Vermont

MR Today is July 24. We are sitting here in the old family home in Woodstock, Vermont waiting for a brief interview with each one of the family members.

LR See that Vermont brevity?

MR We are sitting her in Woodstock in the mansion we call it, my grandfather and grandmother's home. And we used to come up here by train when the train was running to White River Jct., and spend the night on board the train and then come over to Woodstock. [1.10] But nowadays it is quite different, there is no railroad, and we usually fly up to Lebanon and then motor over here to Woodstock to the family home. We are sitting now in the library which used to be in the middle of the room, this desk. But it was moved somewhere over by the window where the light is much better. By the window right below the stained glass window that was so meaningful to all my family. As my sister said once, it illustrates passing the torch of responsibility from one generation to the next. [2.13] And then near the entrance door is a

portrait of my grandfather, and the one of my grandmother is over the fireplace.

JB Now was this stained glass window passing the torch, was that made by somebody here?

LR Tiffany.

MR I think it's Tiffany Glass, is it?

JB And your grandfather had it made?

MR Yes, because when he came back from California he got this home and they lived in it. My grandmother, we have in the hall there's a silhouette of my grandmother when they lived in New York, and she's carrying a little doll. And my grandmother and I were very good friends. [3.18] I used to eat oranges with her in the afternoon. And she also was an influence in teaching a love of the Lord by hymns and Bible reading before breakfast, which we have just had, and later aided by my great aunt. She taught an early Sunday school class in the alcove on the east end of the second floor.

JB Now was your grandmother the person that started the prayer room then?

MR I think so, I don't really know.

LR She was a likely candidate.

MR I don't know because in New York City we lived in an equally large house, but there was, we didn't have the prayer room there. It seems to me,

LR I think your grandfather was too busy dear. He wasn't here for the first 40 years. [4.40]

MR We'll go back to my bedroom was on the third floor, the northeast corner. And I spent many hours there reading my favorite books. My brother's bedroom was next to mine, and we shared a bathroom together. We did many things together. And we were in a golf tournament later on, brothers and sisters golf tournament. Fortunately he was such a good player, and at least I didn't muff the balls so that we won it. We won it several times. [5.13] My sister had a room, this is on the top floor across the hall on the sunny side of the house. We enjoyed being together, riding, playing tennis and collecting kittens from the farmers, taking care of them and the ponies all summer.

LR Why don't you tell them about your mother and the riding on the cow catcher.

MR Oh yes. Back in those days my mother had a beau and they decided to ride the cow catcher from Woodstock

LR Well at White River they had a spur up here see.

MR Yes, of course that involved going over the Quechee Gorge which was very exciting. And she said to my grandmother, she said I think next time I better wear something over my head because it was very windy. My grandmother said, "Mary, there will be no next time."

LR See brevity to the point. That was a nice one. And your mother used to have, I think she had one

of the early cars, so tell her about what she did with the car. [7.06]

MR When they lived here the farmers all used to come to the fairground. My mother told the farmers they said if you want to get used to the cars, I'll have a car there, you can bring your horses up to it, so they'd get used to the car. And at that fairground was now is no longer a fairground.

LR I think it's that big field where the cows graze more or less.

MR We had the Jersey cows, grandfather was a great promoter of the Jersey cows, we sold and processed the milk to many people here. [8.03]

LR You see you never knew your grandfather.

MR I never knew my grandfather but,

LR Your grandmother as you said you did.

JB He must've been a presence though in the family. You must've heard stories about him.

MR Oh yes, grandfather, indeed I have heard many stories, and there books have been written about him. Because he lived in California in the time of the gold rush. He went out there as a lawyer to sell land claims, not to dig for the gold, but adjudicate these lawsuits and became quite wealthy and then helped build the Montgomery Block out there, not the cathedral but a church.

LR And the college, Berkeley.

MR Then he became interested in the University of California and founded the campus founded the college.

LR I think maybe the campus was a Berkeley.

MR Yes, it was named Berkeley after Bishop Berkeley.

LR He found that adjudicating the claims of the gold digger was more profitable than digging the gold. In fact he even carried his shingle from Woodstock to hang it up. Then they had 2 trips, one over the before the Panama Canal, see they had to go over, and tremendous amount of typhoid fever. He took his sister with him and she got sick, and I hate to tell you ultimately died just getting there.
[10.06] And then another time they sailed around Cape Horn I think to get to California, that's why he got so committed to have railroads, see. The law shingle going out there, and then these terrible trips to get to the west coast, needed a railroad. So then he was president of Northern Pacific Railroad. And then the Villard family we call them wicked, took it away from him.

MR And Billings, Montana was named for grandfather.

LR That was fabulous. And their 100th anniversary-- Rhoda mobilized the group and our family speaker was Jonathan. And he was statesmanlike you know, but he had not done much in the 19th Century for quite a few years. So he came back, it was magnificent. And then to raise money, they made a life size bust of Billings, they're expensive, to commemorate this 100th anniversary. So they sold these sold these small duplicates, and this

beautiful buffalo crossing the railroad tracks see. That was called "The Beginning and the End," the end of the buffalo, and the beginning of the railroad. We bought, both of them they're just great. Isn't that wonderful? [11.32]

MR And there's the silver spike up there.

LR Nobody stole it, it's still there.

MR Where the railroad joined, where they met in commemoration of that.

LR That's really dramatic.

JB And that's from the original meeting.

LR Yeah, I think they sawed off the tie you see, and brought--ties were that big, from the railroad bed. Then that thing next to it we got, that's a Steuben interpretation of Cape Horn. We flew over Cape Horn, and we were all over that area on a YW trip. And so Elizabeth and Ethan were with us, so we gave it to them, and then they gave it back. So whether it should remain here or not. But if you think of Cape Horn and his trip then that has symbolic reference.

JB I hadn't realized that he had to come all the way around.

LR Well I mean think of getting there, otherwise you go through the Indians in a covered wagon. They were difficult choices, and particularly if you're going by yourself.

JB But he apparently always had a hankering to come back to Vermont. [12.57]

LR Oh, I think so. He was so self sufficient, and strong character, determined, a really amazing person. And coming right up out of the soil of Vermont because his family were brought over here to Woodstock to be near what do they it Janet, some jail, poverty?

JH He was here to be near the limits of the county jail because he was a debtor.

LR Well that his father wasn't it. And he drove the collateral over which was the pig, and it collapsed out here. And they said that was the darkest moment of his life.

JB He collapsed out by the porch?

LR Well just on the road see. And whether he looked up and somehow saw the mansion and he said I shall return, like McArthur which he did, see. Because his son's people have a story that he was inspired to transcend this horrible affair. So he was, and the character was a long suit of those people. These Vermont qualities you see, hardship, deprivation, principle.

MR And I think when he was walking by the mansion with this pig he vowed

LR That's what I think that he'd raise money enough so he wouldn't have to live like that. [13.31]

LR See that verifies it. He did it right then and there.

MR I skipped around. I did some of the different rooms in the house.

LR Maybe dear we ought to bring over that picture of all the daughter in laws. There's one right here, see that big one?

JB And one thing I wanted to ask you was this place must've seemed so different than New York in those days. When you came up did you look forward to going in the summer, or was it so different that you hated to leave your friends? How did you feel about coming up here? [15.37]

MR Well we just accepted it.

LR You had a pretty big house in New York.

MR We had a house about the same size on 40th Street and Madison Avenue in New York. So that part was somewhat similar to what we had. Up in Woodstock my father also had relatives who lived here. His family had connections. So it seemed quite a natural thing to do in the summertime.

JB But life must've been so different. You must've ridden a lot and hiked.

MR We did that, mostly riding because we were taking care of the ponies. We had gotten them from South Woodstock, Mrs. Anne Bosworth Greene.

LR And you'd lead the parade.

MR Oh yes, we led the parade when it came to the fairground, our ponies. We got them all dressed up in ribbons in their hair, mane and tail, and led the band up from downtown from wherever we got on our ponies down in the village, up to the fairground. A very exciting moment to be able to

do that. ponies would prance around. It was really great fun. [17.18] And we enjoyed all summer riding, playing cops and robbers here in the house, paper chases, and then taking care of the actual ponies in the stable.

JB These are some of the ponies?

MR Yeah, these are the ponies.

JB Now who's in that photograph?

JH That's your sister Elizabeth, and Elizabeth Fisk, and the adults are Jack and Mary Wicks from the country club.

LR A remarkable couple. Let me see the Wicks. He was golf pro for well over 40 year.

MR My father was a great golfer, my mother was one of the first ladies--we have a picture of her.

LR You can see how intrepid a rider, she jumps logs in Wyoming with a pommel, you see. No cowboy would ever dare do that. But you see how you sense an intrepid horse person.

MR It's not a very good idea.

JB And you say you used to have paper chases.

MR Yeah, we cut up paper and then go up the mountain and scatter it. You have to follow, the person who was chasing had to sort of find out where it was, going all over the country. But mostly up the mountain with that.

LR Then you had those Sunday night suppers at the bungalow.

MR Yes, that was a home that my mother had built up there so she could get away a little bit and cook and have a place that was nearby but not as formal for living. So we used to go up there Sunday nights for supper, occasionally spend the night there, and cook the supper. Then we'd come down here, all sing hymns, the family in the big parlor here. [19.51]

JB Did you have favorite hymns? Was there one particular hymn you'd sing every Sunday?

MR It varied of course. We didn't always have very many people, was really just for the family group up there.

JB Maybe it was from Janet, I think your grandfather had a favorite hymn, did I hear that? I never knew what it was and I just wonder if you remembered.

MR My grandmother had a favorite, my grandfather I never knew because he died before. Grandmother had a hymn, yes, she did, Jesus is the name that charms us, what is that one?

LR I never heard of it. Did you have a hymn in mind?

JH I didn't. I think that came from Rhoda Teagle.

JB And the other thing was "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" was I guess something sung at your mother's funeral. I didn't know whether that was one of her favorites.

MR [Sings Jesus Loves Me. 21.38]

JB Now that photograph of your mother playing golf in a long dress. Was that the usual golfing costume in those days?

MR It was just that particular era, it was the fashion. But today we wear shorts, and wouldn't dream of playing golf.

LR Wasn't she a formidable tennis player.

MR Oh yes, she was a champion at Farmington.

LR Your mother was a matriarch, whatever that is.

MR She and my husband's mother were great friends in the YMCA. My mother was national president and Mrs. Rockefeller was chairman of the World Service Council. So I guess they thought we should meet each other. Anyway we did and that was, how many years ago dear?

LR Sixty seven. Important things take a long time. They were so powerful that they maneuvered Mary's brother John and my brother Nelson to room together 4 years at Dartmouth.

JB They maneuvered that?

LR Well I mean when Nelson died John wrote me and said "I still look back with great pleasure of my years with Nelson in spite of mother's intervention. See these are free and independent people, they don't like being programmed. We'll never know whether psychically we were brought back after a 7 year quiet period together. So don't underestimate mother influence. Dear, what was your father, he

was a lawyer, but didn't he teach Latin at one time? [23.45]

MR I think he did, at Hill School.

JB Now he also grew up in Vermont.

LR Yes, he was a Vermonter.

MR He had a brother, Will French was a farmer, and Warren French was another brother and he was a lawyer.

LR He was like me dear, he was committed to marry your mother and peacefully waited about 20 years till she was ready to get married because her independence in the program was so great. But they did get married and that was it. The he died too soon right after our wedding practically.

MR It was, I think it was the year after. ('35.)

LR But he personified the quiet strength and charm of the Vermonters.

MR He was a good actor, my father.

LR He used to go to the Mystery Club in Greenwich where they used to put on plays, write papers.

MR My mother used to write little short, what are they?

LR Essays and read them before the club. One she wrote here on those old trees, the first trees. You know.

MR Oh yes, the ginkgo tree, she had a special article on the ginkgo tree.

LR And I think they did play bridge with Greenwich friends.

MR They commuted by train to New York, had a club car and they'd meet with their friends.

LR And then he became a lawyer at a New York law firm.

MR They'd play bridge coming back in the club car. They had a really nice friendly time in Greenwich.

JB Your mother I guess really enjoyed coming up here.

LR She in effect had inherited the whole thing from her mother, because her sister D.A. [Dear Aunt] was very inactive. She may have been a co owner but very passive. Is there any other member, just those 2 sisters, or was another sister, Laura. She had her home over there, and sister was right upstairs.

MR In the Billings home across, the father of Carl Taylor? (Pauline.) But my aunt I wanted to say was in thinking over the rooms that the family had, she was on the second floor. And we always called her D.A., Dear Aunt. [27.07] And she would take us in a little sun room beyond her bedroom there. On Sundays she'd be giving us the Bible lessons before we went to Sunday school. That was in the alcove at the end of the hall on the second floor, we used to meet there on Sunday mornings.

LR She spent her life collecting ferns and labeling them. So now we inherited this fern collection. Of course what to do with them. First they gave it

to Dartmouth and they gave it back, then we gave it to this bird group.

MR Sister saw it on the floor. [28.15]

LR She asked the botanical gardens to send her some young assistant for one summer. Well the assistant came back about 18 years. It was an incredible thing. She was persistent.

JB So she must've been quite a botanist.

LR Intelligent. Persistent.

MR She was. And they labeled all the ferns on the side of the hill going up trees.

JB Were they all ferns from right around here?

MR Yes, all of them. I don't think they had garden clubs in those days. The garden club has been here, enjoyed seeing some of these things that my aunt planted and the gardens.

JB I was noticing the gardens yesterday. Now did your mother and your aunt plant, develop the gardens?

MR Well I know my aunt must've done it, and my mother I don't believe had any particular botanical.

LR Maybe she delegated to Carl Bergstrom who's been with us 43 years. [29.34]

MR I think she did. I think she did.

JB Now your grandfather and grandmother must've started the gardens, or were they here originally?

MR Of course we didn't know grandfather--that was before.

LR Presumably the old Marsh place was relatively modest. And Mr. Billings expanded it into a big estate and then added a floor, added wings, redid all the rooms you see. And he did it twice. So the Marsh family was small, but they had an elegant house architecturally, their house was beautiful. And one architect suggested we just preserve that. [30.20] He couldn't go back to that. He must've because it was too late to preserve it. He said why don't you take off the top floor and just go back to what was originally here, restoration see. And it was a magnificently beautiful, simple house.

JB Which was the core of it?

LR Outside you can see the bricks pretty well. I think the original wall is there and over by the dining room. See the reason that Mrs. French had to sit here, that window had been bricked up to put more books you see. So there's no place in the room she could put her desk with the light unless she jammed it in that corner. So then she moved it a little like a judge. [31.17]

JB And it was in the center of the room.

LR Facing that way. And then she kept a diary which you had all typed up, interesting record, her diaries were eloquent.

MR Some people ask reasons for considering property as a national heritage trust. [31.55] We felt it was best way to preserve the Billings Farm & Museum, plus preserving the mansion. Because Carl

Humelsine I talked to him because we thought a little bit of the land trust. But they say

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A]

[TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

MR We weren't clear at all, we had no solution at that time.

LR I love to dramatize. Marsh and Billings preserved it a 100 years. Then Mary's grandmother, her mother and herself preserved it another 100 and she was sitting here wondering what to do with it for the third century. We knew parks so well that the continuity and stability for the next 100 years seemed an overwhelmingly good way of unburdening our responsibility. See it was a God-given situation.

JB Well did you tell me that Lady Bird also had something to do with this?

MR She came out here, we were on the porch, addressed all the people from Vermont.

LR And the people, the community, they had Stewart Udall, and she was here to give us a plaque designating this a National Historic Site, Marsh you see, no reference to Billings because he hadn't reappeared through Winks. So I think this event was clearly the most important single event, because it led to Robin Winks, it led to the national park. [4.31] And then we went up with in the Coolidge, see Mary's been interested in the

Coolidge, and she created that a national historic park (landmark). People in Vermont were so close to him they had forgot he was part of history.

JB You did that?

LR No, Lady Bird. A Democrat had to come up to help the Republicans recognize their own history.

MR I'm on the board of the Coolidge Foundation. They only meet once or twice a year. It's a very important part of conservation.

LR Lady Bird did such good, she wants to come back here once more. (She loves it here.) She's 80, not very strong. She wants one more time, so she's been a friend for us since the early 50's. It's extraordinary.

JB How did you first meet her? [5.29]

LR Well here was this Outdoor Recreation Review Commission, which probably with Nelson's influence and Horace Albright, I was made a member of and then made chairman. And Eisenhower officially designated us. And then we worked on this thing that got about 3 1/2 million to pay for it. But then you see everything was fine but they didn't have the money authorized. And Nelson was a good friend of Rayburn who was Speaker of the House was it? Yes. So he said I'll get this thing done. But then he forgot. When the time came for the vote, so he stepped down from the speaker's platform and introduced this legislation himself to fund 3 1/2 million for this report see. [6.17] So this business of people being almost everything-- that was dramatic. And then we had years of doing

this, White House conference on the environment and all of these events the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation cost billions. The President made offshore oil income all go to the environment. Well this is so much, it was almost too much. And it was just a marvelous situation. So one way or another we got mixed up with the environment along with Marsh and Billings.

JB And Lady Bird was involved.

LR And she was there and sort of swept us into her backing group you see. The President made me chairman of this conference and we all went to the White House and reported to him, he had all his cabinet and everybody there. So we were well launched I mean by destiny meaning Lady Bird with his support. You know, it was just amazingly great. [7.26] And then obviously subsequently she came up here. She used to take trips to enhance, to preserve the environment.

JB Did she come up here before '67?

LR No I don't think so, probably not. So we in recent years have been supporting her Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower, she changed the name, Wildflower Center. We just went to Texas to inaugurate that. Then we went down there to speak at their 80th birthday. And she's been on all our boards and out to the JY Ranch. You know the synchronicity has been beyond.

JB And you have that rocking chair.

LR Yes, the President gave us that see. We made many trips to the Johnson ranch, what do you call it,

LBJ Ranch. So he gave us that chair. See so there was wonderful ambience, and what a difference.

[8.33] But I don't know whether there's anything that's important for me to say how did I get into the family.

JB I want to go back to that. But there is one other thing I also want to ask Mrs. Rockefeller. You told that wonderful story about Calvin Coolidge coming here to visit your mother, and I wondered if you'd tell that. [8.55]

MR My mother invited him for lunch here in the summertime, and they came. As they were getting out of the car the President said, "I have always wanted to come here. And now that I'm here I will have nothing to look forward to" or something like that. And then he came in to lunch with his wife, and she was very talkative at lunch. He never said a word, not a word.

LR He'd said it all. "Nothing to look forward to."

MR I think he really was impressed, and we sure were thrilled to have him.

JB Were you present? (to Mrs. Rockefeller)

MR Yes.

LR And you went over to the Coolidge's place, I don't know whether you rode the ponies, you couldn't have ridden with a friend. And he was sitting on his porch so they went and joined him.

MR He said, "Won't you come up and join me?" They had 3 rocking chairs. We had a very nice visit with him.

LR And you were what, a teenager then?

MR I think so, it was quite a while ago.

JB Did he talk more that day?

MR Well there was no other time that he came here, that was the only visit here.

LR But he must've talked to you two girls probably just in a casual way.

MR He was quite an interesting person. He was very quiet.

LR Oh, that picture of Edison. Is that out in the hall Janet? I think it was right out there. Frank Lieberman--it was in his collection. When Frank died Ellison gave us this picture. It's the most wonderful picture of Coolidge. And then Edison is cranking one of the earliest movie cameras. And as our archivist--take a look at that picture. Didn't he look superbly well, serene, good looking. Isn't that a marvelous thing? And look at Edison. So you know that was some gift, Ellison just took me through the house, I want you to have on of Frank's pictures. [11.30]

JB And Frank took this?

LR No no, but he collected see, and that was his role in this book, and they wrote several books about Woodstock and about Billings and all that. So he

was the old picture person you see. But that's such a great, they both look so human.

JB Yes, it doesn't look like an old photograph.

LR Maybe they can use it in a documentary film. Look how handsome and human they both look. But you know I think we need to think a little out loud. See we got married here, and I had hardly ever been here before. And then we just went off, had our children, the war, one thing and another for 20 years you see. So I had a meager association with Woodstock till about 1953 when the 3 children owned the place. It became apparent that joint ownership would not work. So they were happy to sell out to Mary so to speak. [12.45] And at that time therefore then we spent 2 years rebuilding the house you see with Ted Muller who put in modern heating and redid the plumbing, the wiring, added bathrooms.

JB Did you not have bathrooms?

LR Well they had them about 2 to a floor. Now we maybe have 3. Then buying no new furniture-refurbished, is that the word, new covers for the furniture, curtains, everything. And he did a superb job you see, leaving the house for all appearances as it was, but fresh and new and functional and durable. And this was something. So then we moved up here much more seriously, and started to evolve into the community. Well now one of these questions, how did I happen to do what I did? [13.44] I was thinking you see, being brought up with father, I really did here what he had done in "Pocantico", he just started preserving

scenic views and brooks and trees, bridle paths and horses. First thing you know 50 years they had 3,000 acres around the old mansion. Then he went to Maine and did the same thing. Next thing you know we have Acadia Park. And we'd be out walking with him and building log cabins in the woods, ponies and all of that sort of stuff, he'd give us maple sugar, to bribe us to come on these walks on Sunday, and always morning prayers. So you see our culture and spiritual background I mean unbelievably strong and similar and rooted.

[14.46] Then again you see we were, Winthrop and John ended up active in Williamsburg. But we were all drawn into this whole restoration stuff. And then in Jackson Hole we went there to the JY Ranch which was an inholding, and father bought 33,000 acres out there to preserve the foreground. So when I got here I think I just did what came naturally, started to reach out scenic values, preservation, open space, then becoming aware of historic preservation. [15.22] And then you see I think it was very fortuitous for all kinds of reasons that we worked solely through the Woodstock Foundation and the Woodstock Inn & Resort. So our name was hardly mentioned here for 20 years. You see that was good, it was very good. Then we weren't here enough, I mean we could've been accused of being in a sense absentee owners, well we weren't, we were here heart and soul, roots and everything else. But that was all rather fortuitous and we never appeared anywhere and in person till that time in the town hall you see. And then suddenly Mary appeared and they all told her you cannot do anything artificial like opening a meeting with prayer, all her advisors see. So

she did it, and everyone says you could feel the whole room relax.

MR My YWCA training.

LR So this is one of the greatest examples of the power of spirit you know in an applied way, prayer power, see. [16.38]

JB Now your mother always used to open things with prayer too, didn't she?

MR At the YWCA, not so much grace at the table. Occasionally my aunt would have grace at the table.

LR Your mother was quite an activist, a doer. And you know what? They never ate outdoors. Isn't that something how you get grooved? And so that's been our joy. And of course we took the porch off, that was the one maybe indiscreet thing, but there was no place to look at the stars or sit in the sun unless you opened that and then it let light into this room, we opened that window, the same thing in the music room. So on balance give and take the pros and cons, I think it was pretty good. [17.35] Then you see so what we're talking about was sort of the historic and environmental protection, and then by almost osmosis the old Inn was dying, we dreaded the fact that we might have to take it over. We tried to get New England hotel branches to take an interest. And the nice hotel manager, remember we knew him, he became manager, of Caneel Bay, and we went there. Wilder was the original manager, he did all those paintings you see in the Inn. Now we were criticized by everyone including that woman governor for not restoring the old Inn.

JB Madeline, Kunin?

LR Madeline, see. See that's a total fire trap, and it was right on the road with the trucks. So by building the new Inn behind we were able to keep the old Inn open you see. So destiny just swept us in.

MR Yeah it was destiny.

LR And then we were already working on skiing, but we liked that ourselves you see. And then of course the Congregational Church we got started there, we went there as recently as yesterday. We had a near massacre when the ceiling fell.

MR That was a miracle.

LR And one day sooner the place was packed, and it fell with nobody in it. It just peeled off from the front and these are heavy oak things.

MR It would have killed about 300 people.

JB So it happened on a Monday rather than on a Sunday.

LR Yes, exactly. And this was only a little over a year ago. And then the insurance company believe it or not paid for everything to repair it. So now the church you see has been rebuilt. [19.33] And even the Billings Chapel they've agreed to restore. They'd sort of white washed all the wood. They sort of wanted something like a dance hall or something, sweep through there. Well they recanted so now they're going to restore that.

MR That really was a miracle that closeness. Who was it that said, oh Carl Bergstrom yesterday, we called on him. And he said that he had.

LR He was there in the audience the day before. The people that would have been injured and killed, there's no point in thinking about.

MR It's too awful to even think about.

LR It was terrible.

LR So you see so many things by destiny alone and the human equation have happened. And of course the Farm & Museum see, there's another thing. How we ever got started in that I think was just basically Scott Hastings and nobody knows where he appeared from. But he appeared, and we began to listen to him and all his dialogue about crafts and folklife. And for some reason he wanted to have this museum be from 1890, that was the building's cut off, to 1924, which would include coal and farm equipment, maybe some oil see. Well to me the drama of 1890 is they had no oil or coal, no fossil fuel. So all the ingenuity of 100 or 200 years peaked you see before this new era of energy came in. And I never could understand why I mean there was a certain logic that way. [21.20] But see it happened that Billings was at the peak of the non fossil fuel era. So we won out on that. And then with this collection the idea of the farm museum somehow folklife, handcraft, I felt was really implicit a lot of it in the farm museum. The farm museum somehow had a more integrated public appeal than it would've otherwise. So that was another miracle you see, unplanned, unexpected events. Then

everything sort of coalesced, and I like to think of myself as a catalyst. This is a perfect example of the influence of a person as a member of a team rather than as a figurehead. In Vermont I guess that was particularly appreciated.

JB And also as a member of a family that's located right here. And that's something I wanted to ask you about the first time you came, if you can go back. What were your impressions? You came on it in your 20's. Mrs. Rockefeller grew up in it so it was in a sense part of you. But you came in your 20's. What was your first impression? [22.57]

LR Nelson and John had been rooming together. The mothers, you know so the family ties and I was a 17 year old, first love of course--I was too young for someone who like college boys. So I was 6 years to wait, like Mr. French only not as long. And then I only can remember being here once before we came to get married, and then when I brought lobsters for Mrs. French from Maine.

MR (Protesting)

LR Now I probably might've been dear, but you and I weren't dating during this period. Nelson would write her letters telling her how attractive I was and why didn't she get to know me better! Remember that letter dear?

MR Yes!

LR These old letters are amazing what you never would've known. [23.50] So I came here you know not as a stranger to the family, but stranger to Woodstock. So I was put up and spent the night in

the Belvedere [i.e. the Bungalow] see. I had 2 or 3 college roommates. And of course the wedding was all very formal garb. And we had iced tea and chicken salad. Then off we went to Pecketts in New Hampshire for the night, one of the earliest ski places. And then on the Wyoming where we went hunting we shot our only game. Each one--we shot one elk and one moose together. So that's where our partnership started. See, we've been going back ever since, we're so dedicated and love the woods so father gave us the ranch you see, which the other boys either didn't notice it or never commented on. That was nice.

MR I'll say it was nice.

LR Well they're going to have this hearing late this winter you see.

JB On whether it should be?

LR They're going to present, they'll have a 1,000 copies of the plan.

JB And this is here in Woodstock.

LR Oh yeah, and all the people that want them will have a copy, and then they'll present the plan, answer questions, so forth and so on, and hopefully we will have had the plan known to us and quite a few people to be able to anticipate questions for which there are good answers. See they're worried about where will the entrance of the park be. And then they got all upset that it'll be on River Street and then all the traffic will come there. Well of course it's going to be right here. I mean the biggest issue in my mind is how to get the

people across the highway. I think one of these white designated things may be the answer. We've never gotten as far as the stoplight.

MR A blinking light or something because they do come roaring up the hill here. And other people come roaring down this way. It is rather difficult to cross the street. But that sort of thing I think we should work out.

LR You see John French you see, he and his second wife, his first wife we knew extremely well, and still do, Rhoda Teagle. And then his second wife, a wife we were very fond of. And of course we have this wonderful picture of the 2 of them on the river the day before he died see. So he was there for our 50th. He went, he said "let's see how far we can go up in an hour and a half" or something like that. He used to refer to his so called heart attack, Vermont understatement, see, he just fell in his tracks just like that. And then some professional mountain climbers and people trained in artificial respiration were there to help Ellie feel that if he could have been saved he would have been saved.

JB Where was he? [38.08]

LR Well he just died on the trail, they had to get a helicopter to get his body out. This was in the morning of our 50th anniversary. So then the question was could we have this party see. And again Mary's prayer power, see once she could say grace and accept it, then everybody else did. Don't ever underestimate that.

MR Well it was all the Lord's doing.

LR That's a tough one, isn't it. And really what helped save us you know was Larry French, I don't know if you know Larry but he is a grandson of John French. He's a would-be photographer. And he was out there, and he spent the afternoon and evening with Ellie, and they just got on like that. So he stayed with her you see during this period, then she slept with us at night. And then we flew his ashes back the next day. But this is a good example of prayer power. And you did it.

MR It's the Lord's doing.

LR Well I accept that too. But you interceded for his help, for us all. And then see John gave us this silver maple for our 25th. They carried this tree with a little silver chain and a plaque, and we can see it out there, it's about 50 feet high. Then for our 50th wedding he was going to give us a Japanese golden rain tree. And of course he died but he was going to mention it. So then we went out and bought one, and then that didn't live. Then we bought another. And now we have this really tree growing, and it's absolutely gold about this time of year. So the silver maple and the golden rain tree you see. And [30.20] then John just to show these non secular values running in the family, sometimes in spite of appearances. So he, John was class president, editor of the Dartmouth, Junior Phi Beta and all that, so he was going to be the commencement speaker, whatever. So he spoke on I think on leisure and values, about the tragedy that our civilization is becoming so secular and insensitive to spiritual and aesthetic

values. And I've had this reprinted several times. His text so to speak was, a Persian Proverb, and the essence of it was "If thou of fortune be bereft, and in thy store there be but left loaves, sell one and buy hyacinths."

MR Be in my soul, that's good dear, that's beautiful.

LR My thesis was on the concept of values in ethics. And then we've created a center of values and principles. [offers tea]

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

[TAPE TWO, SIDE A]

LR When the Inn was a crisis, the White Cupboard Inn was a crisis. Then we started up buying up these old houses to preserve them, and beefing up the Historical Society. Then John and Shummy Mayer, he came in, he was really a museum curator. And they enriched everything. Of course the collection is supposed to be limited to Woodstock, you just didn't go out and buy stuff. But that was a labor of love, wasn't it what John Mayer did. Then that glorious parking field there, we've tried to raise a fee every year. So rebuilding and enhancing the Historical Society was a byproduct of preserving these houses you see. And then we finally bought the old Bailey House. Now the town won't let us use it, it's part of the Inn. I'm not sure they finally did let us, we decided it was uneconomical to do it. So if you know anyone would like to live there, it looks so beautiful. [1.07] It's the

finest looking house. Mr. Billings bought it for his parents in their old age, isn't that the story?

JH That's right.

LR And allegedly in fact somebody said the old bathtub is still there, it's supposed to be the first bathtub in Woodstock, if not Vermont. So you see that's historic in terms of family. That's when I asked John McDill if he thought we should buy it, he said well, in my opinion it's the first house you should've bought. Of course it wasn't for sale.

JB I'm going to ask you one other thing because this thing wasn't seated right. But on the ski area, just to re sketch briefly the Mt. Tom, what you told me was basically.

LR We didn't really have any community family sitting. So we in effect provided a very inexpensive because we used existing buildings see. I guess just rope towers. [2.18] And then we had a T bar. Then we got another one for beginners so that they could go up and down on this side and intermediates go up and down on the other side and this nice little warming hut there which is so attractive. And then with Bunny Bertram going out of business up there at Suicide Six we had the chance to buy all that you see for very little. And then over several years expanded that and then were able to come Mt. Tom, unite the family which was good. And of course Suicide Six used to be the terror of the east coast you see. So we left quite a few of the Mt. Monadnocks or whatever you call them in the

But today I mean those people just go straight down like bats you see it means nothing.

JB When you first you told me were towed up by trucks. Was that out here at Mt. Tom?

LR Yes.

JB And a truck could?

LR Well the thing was a snowmobile, or a grooming vehicle, maybe the earliest made, snow cats, it probably was a snow cat. [3.39] You see I'm one of the most courageous things--I never saw anyone else do it, I would unhesitatingly take my skis off and walk down if I saw no coherent way of getting down other than doing that. I've never seen anyone else do that.

JB Even with you short skis.

LR We went to St. Sauveur in Cananda. Was one quite difficult hill and Lucy came in beaming, she said "I only fell 18 times." Well once too much.

JB So you would use this place then on Washington's birthday and New Years. [4.22]

LR And then summers basically, the 4th of July till after our anniversary which was the 15th of August. Last year, we're talking about this room, we had 5 tables for 10 in this room, and then 3 tables of 10 in there makes 80, and a nifty little orchestra and a dance floor.

JB Oh, and we forgot about the garden parties too. But your anniversary, this was your 60th. And you held it here.

LR And it was just great because you know we resorted to trying to program to get people to volunteer to say a few words, we just didn't do anything see. And the children took over which was ideal. Then Naomi who dreams to be Barbara Streisand sang "Unforgettable."

MR She was adorable.

LR Everybody wanted to buy an interest in her future at the Met. [5.22]

JH It was her 18th birthday, something like that? Her birthday falls on the same day.

LR Of course Ethan and his family gave a lunch which was great because there we could reunite and meet because if we tried to say hello to everybody in the receiving line it was too much. So the two worked together perfectly. And one of the breakthroughs was we got a truck and we put everything into the truck, parked it over night. And then when we took them all to the Inn for lunch the next day it was all put back. That was how it was practical to take every bit of furniture out, the only way we could do it.

MR You wouldn't think it was possible. Those big sofas.

LR These movers are so extraordinary, getting it back, it was wonderful. [6.10] And then we had another dramatic thing once. We had a New Years Eve party involving Lolita who was a long time friend, and her mother used to give these punch parties right across the bridge. And so she had this formula, I think instead of bourbon they used brandy and eggs

and then they'd age them on the stoop and stuff like that. So her contribution was her formula. And then Mrs. Hann Gray comes up here, the president of the university, she likes it bourbon so we had bourbon too. And we had all the community up, and it was a great old time. That was New Years about 3 or 4 years ago I guess.

JB Now did you use the same tradition till 10 o'clock?

LR Well yes, because this was not, I think we had enough snacks so you wouldn't have to go get supper, we didn't serve supper. Isn't that right?

JH It was a late afternoon affair I think, as I recall.

LR Well yes, say from 5 to 7 or something like that. But it was fun, that was using the old place. Now we think we've got 2 years more that we can be here next summer and the following summer, so we can have a few more farewell events.

JB I think we've just about done it, you've been just great.

LR Rather than events and dates, I mean they were incidental which is what you basically wanted. I did find out, I had to, I had to get oriented in my own life. And we did not really get here till '58, married in '34. I mean the house had been rebuilt so we moved in, and it was then that I think we really started to take some initiative. But we never had a plan you know what I mean, we just breathed, we just expanded, real good old zens finding without seeking. Then the answer was I've been groomed by my father to know what to do

without even thinking about it. I mean that's as plausible as anything. It gives credibility. I think there's a lot of wisdom in that. And then we've tried to bring in this extraordinary French family. See they've gotten a little squeezed with the Billings suddenly being reactivated. The French family was very much there. [Tape off and on] ... in the walks up to the bungalow. So that's very rustic.

JB And this is Belvedere.

LR And then you see Mr. Billings, that was his escape hatch where he could get away from family. And if he ever wanted a drink probably could've had it up there. We never knew what he did.

MR Well, he may have. Grandfather might have wanted that.

LR It was his office. That's my fantasy, isn't that a more or less, reasonable assumption. Wait till you get up there, you overlook the farm and everything, the woodlands up there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]