

William B. Skiff and Lydia Skiff Ernst
October 12, 2008

Female: Like this. We are talking to Lydia Skiff Ernst and Bill Skiff. It's October 12, 2008. So, I just want the two of you to talk about what it was like in Beadle Hill when you were little kids.

William: Well, I'll start. Do you want to start?

Lydia: Well, I was born on December 8, 1907, on Beadle Hill. That's all I remember because, when you're an infant, you don't know who, whose—

Female: How old were you when you moved into Greenwich?

Lydia: I was six years old.

Female: Do you remember what, do you remember anything between the time you were born and six? Remember what it was like living on Beadle Hill or what your dad or mom, your mother or father did?

Lydia: No, I don't remember anything that happened [laughs]. Just, uh, I remember, uh, leaving Beadle Hill to go to Greenwich, yes, when I was six years old.

Female: What kind of business did your father have? What did he do?

Lydia: Well, he, uh, he had stores in, in Greenwich. He got, uh, when I go to Greenwich, there was, he worked in a store in, in, uh, Greenwich. When he first went in. And, after—Well, that was in World War I. And the reason that we lived there was because, uh, the manager of the store was, uh, had to go to, uh, war in nineteen, in early 1900s.

Female: Right.

Lydia: And then, when we left, it was because, uh, the man that managed the store in, in Greenwich had to go, go to World War I.

Female: Right.

Female: Now, when you were born, Aunt Lydia, what was the year? 1907?

Lydia: Nineteen, 1907.

Female: And when you were six—nineteen—that's right because you would have gone into Greenwich about 1913. And the war started in 1914 and lasted until about 1919, I think. So, is that? Yeah. So, he had to go to war and your father took over the store.

Lydia: No, he didn't close the store.

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Female: He took over. He took it over. He ran it.

Lydia: Yes.

Female: Oh, okay.

Lydia: He managed it.

Female: Right.

Female: You can both talk. Did your father have a store in Easton?

William: Yeah. In Easton Corners or North Easton. We know, know that my father had a store there to begin with. And then, in nineteen—I don't know what year it was.

Lydia: I don't either.

William: Nineteen, about 1914 or 15, he bought the store in Greenwich. I'm not sure just what year it was.

Lydia: When he bought two stores.

William: Well he had the, the grocery store and then he had a dry goods store that Bill Dobbins [phonetic]. His name was Bill Dobbins, I think.

Lydia: Yes.

William: He managed the dry goods store.

Lydia: Yes.

William: My father had the grocery store.

Lydia: Yeah.

William: And then he owned a farm at the same time he bought it. But then, after a few— Well, for a while there, at one time, he moved to Greenwich and you, when you and Chet were small, you lived on Hill Street for a few years.

Lydia: Until I was six.

William: And then, after that, he went back to the farm again and worked for a short time. And then, in 1921 is when we moved to Greenwich. My father and all of us, all of us in the family moved to Greenwich.

Lydia: Yes, in '21.

William: In 1921. On Hill Street. Of course, the store was, what? So, then he was attracted to the store and we had to go up in, in the store and, well, he still had it going during the depression.

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Lydia: Yes.

William: And we found it was pretty tough for a lot of people [laughs] like it was. Dad didn't do it in Easton but uh...

Lydia: Well, he s-, he started several stores at that time.

William: Well, that's, yeah. But, but, anyway, he, he liked stores because he bought a store in Battenville.

Female: Oh, did he? I didn't hear that.

Lydia: A store in Battenville and another one in Salem.

William: Yeah, that's right. Yep. A meat market. But that doesn't have anything to do with Easton but, anyway, those were the years, in the 20s, that those—

Lydia: Yes.

William: ...these things took place.

Lydia: He, the, the managers of those stores lived in those areas. The one...

William: George—My father had two sons by his first marriage, George and Paul. And, as I remember, George was in charge of the store in Salem.

Lydia: Yes. Yeah.

William: And then the, man this is talking about everything that took place in Greenwich because the store was there and we all wanted to work in the store. And, and, uh, farmers would bring their eggs in and buy their groceries. And so that's the way they, they'd buy the eggs and they'd get the groceries so that's the way we handled [laughs] handled our accounts.

Female: You didn't, well, well, on the farm in, uh—First of all, explain where the farm was in Easton. Can you explain?

William: Well, the farm was in the southern part of Easton, in what's called the Beadle Hill area. It's in South Easton.

Lydia: Yes. It was South Easton.

Female: And what did your father do on the farm? Did he have cows or—

William: Well, of course. That's what he had on the farm. He had the farm. He had—

Lydia: A manager.

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William: Yeah. He had cows. He had sheep. He had pigs. In those days, you had about everything. And chickens.

Female: Yeah.

William: And, in those years, of course, there wasn't any electricity. And we had, uh, everything was lighted by lanterns, the lanterns that you carried in the barn and lamps in the house, kerosene lanterns and lamps.

Lydia: Yes. There was no electricity. And there was no electricity for the milking machine. So, my father bought a—

William: At that time, I think it was called a Delco electric system. He bought a Delco electric system and we had it in the cellar in the house. And that would generate electricity. So that allowed us to have electric lights in the house.

Female: Wow.

William: But that's it. I mean, we didn't have, didn't have wires running to the barn but that's when we had lights in the house and I don't know what year that was.

Female: Now the house that you—

Lydia: Well, the—

Female: Oh, go ahead.

Lydia: The house was, uh, run by, lit by electricity. Yes.

Female: Now, the—

William: Well, his, his, the house was the family's, your family house.

Female: Right.

William: And he had brothers and sisters that lived in the house to begin with. But then, as they got older, they dispersed and they went. Well, I think they all went to—I guess to—I suppose all of them went to, through eighth grade in the school, country schools.

Female: Well, now your father, where did his—Your father was Edward J. Skiff, E. J. Skiff.

William: Yeah.

Female: And he had brothers and, one brother and two sisters?

Lydia: No.

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William: Sam was a brother.

Lydia: Brothers?

William: And there was Lonnie.

Lydia: Yes.

William: I didn't know them because I was just a kid. That was before they, before I was born.

Lydia: Yes. He died.

William: And then there was Emma.

Lydia: Emma and Aunt Rhoda.

William: And, uh...

Lydia: Uncle Sam.

William: What was the, what was the, the, my father's sister's name that married a Becker [phonetic]? Uncle Hufford [phonetic], Cathcart's [phonetic] mother?

Female: Lena Cathcart's mother?

Lydia: Lena Cathcart's mother? She moved to [inaudible].

William: She was a Skiff.

Lydia: Yes.

William: She was a Skiff. What was her name?

Lydia: Cathcart. Oh, I don't remember.

William: It's my father's sister's name. I don't remember.

Female: Oh, really? Because I know, I, I remember—

William: There, there was—

Female: Lonnie and Sam and Emma and Rhoda and then E. J.

William: Yeah.

Female: Were there five of them or was there another one?

Lydia: There's another one.

Female: I can't remember.

Lydia: There's one that di-, died when she was, another girl that died when she was four.

Female: Oh.

Lydia: I think it was. I think her name was Mary.

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Female: Now, I know that Emma married Becker and she lived down Route 40.

William: Hm-hmm [affirmative].

Female: And, uh, I know she was really involved in the Political Equality Club in Easton. But now, what happened to Sam and Lonnie? Where did they go?

William: Well, Sam was a merchant. He, uh, had a, a meat market in Cambridge and his son was Charlie Skiff, wasn't it? It was his son's name.

Lydia: Charlie. Yes.

William: And they had a meat market in Cambridge. And then, after that, I guess Charlie's son had a meat market in Schuylerville.

Lydia: That's right.

William: But...

Lydia: Yes.

William: But they were all interested in merchandise and buying and selling.

Lydia: Yes.

William: Was, was with the...

Lydia: Yeah.

William: Having stores and meeting people.

Female: The Skiffs either had stores or they were farmers, right?

Lydia: Yes. But, no.

William: You know, they started out on farms.

Female: Right.

William: But, uh, after my father's first wife died, he married, uh—

Lydia: Emma.

William: Who'd he marry?

Lydia: Emma Skiff, he married.

Female: He was married to Birbeck [phonetic], a Birbeck.

William: Birbeck to begin with.

Female: What was her first name? I can't remember. Um, he was married to a Birbeck.

William: Yeah.

Lydia: Yes.

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Female: And she died and then he married Carrie Beadle.

William: Yeah. Well then he married Carrie Beadle. Carrie Beadle's our mother.

Female: Right. Right. Um, so you moved out of Easton when you were both really quite young. You were four.

William: Yeah, I was five.

Female: And—Oh, you were five. But you must have been older when you moved out the second time, Lydia. When you moved to Academy Street—

Lydia: Yes.

Female: ...how old were you?

Lydia: 13.

Female: All right, so do you remember? What do you remember like when you were 10, 11, 12, 13? Did you go to school? And work? Where—

Lydia: Yeah. So, I didn't. Beadle Hill. The rural school was in Beadle Hill. When I was six and until I was 13. Because the manager of the stores was, that's where I, where I worked, 6 to 13, I went to country school.

William: We moved from the, we moved from the farm to Greenwich in 1921.

Female: Okay. And so, you, but, but, uh, Lydia went to the country school at the top of Beadle Hill. You must have had to walk down the hill and up the hill again, right?

Lydia: Yes. Yes.

William: Of course, they had to walk.

Lydia: But it wasn't much of a hill.

Female: Oh.

Lydia: A hill and then flat.

William: We used to, we used to walk to school naturally. And they all, everybody had to walk to school.

Lydia: It was easy to walk to school in those days.

Female: What was, what was school—Uh, I have two questions for you. First of all, you said you worked at a store when you were about six or seven years old or...?

Lydia: No.

Female: No, okay.

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Lydia: No, no.

Female: What was the school like? What do you remember about the school?

Lydia: It was one big room.

William: A big little grade school.

Lydia: It was one—

William: Up to eighth grade.

Female: Yeah.

Lydia: One big room with a, a stove and, and, uh, there was heat by oil or wood, I don't know which.

Female: Right.

Lydia: And it was very nice. There were about 28 of us kids.

Female: Wow.

Lydia: And different, uh, uh, classes. We had arithmetic. I had arithmetic when I was, uh—I had O'Brian [phonetic] for a teacher who—and that was the eighth grade.

Female: Hm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

Lydia: So, I was—

Female: So, were there any bullies in the classroom? Any boys that picked on little kids?

Lydia: No. I don't remember that. Do you?

Female: Well, you didn't go to school there though.

William: No. I didn't go to school there, no.

Lydia: No. No, that's right.

William: But I remember going to school. Now, you took me to school there one day. I remember that.

Lydia: Yes.

Female: Oh, really. What was that about? What was that like?

William: Well, she took me to school before I was five years old. Naturally, when we was on the farm. I remember going with her to school one day.

Female: Remember?

Lydia: Yes, I remember it very well.

Female: Why did you take him to school?

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Lydia: Because I wanted him to see it and I wanted him to see the kids.

William: [Laughs.]

Female: [Laughs.] So, what? Was he there the whole day?

Lydia: Uh.

Female: Did he stay the whole day with you?

Lydia: Probably. I don't remember but I—

William: I remember that day I went. I remember walking there, up with you and back with you. That's all I remember.

Lydia: Well, then you, uh, were there for the day. Yes. Uh, that, was it, that could've been in 1913.

Interview: No, it must have been, it must have been 1921 or so.

Lydia: No.

William: 1921 was when we came, yeah, 1921.

Lydia: Well, I was born, I was born in 1907.

Female: Right.

Lydia: And you were born five years later. So that would make you—

William: What?

Female: No, he was born in 1916.

William: Oh, no. No.

Lydia: 1916?

Female: Yeah.

William: Yeah. Sure. I didn't hear any different. Do you want to ask—

Female: Okay, here's the question I have. Do you remember what you did in school that day?

William: When I went with her?

Female: When you went with Aunt Lydia. Yeah.

William: Uh, I think, I don't remember that day but I know from experience what you told me and other people told me, in the wintertime at noon. It was down a hill, Beadle Hill, and you took your sled and you can ride downhill [laughs].

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Lydia: Yes. Well, you went up, up, when you got to Beadle Hill, you turn right and continue walking up that hill. And then, I can remember Chet, our brother Chet, riding on the sleigh. He would lie on the sleigh.

William: That's what I'm saying. That's what they did in the wintertime.

Lydia: Yes.

William: At noontime, they had the sleds.

Lydia: Yes.

Female: What time did you have to be at school in the morning? Do you remember?

Lydia: Nine o'clock.

Female: And what time did you walk home?

William: Four.

Female: Four.

Lydia: Yes.

Female: Oh, a long day. Did you—

Lydia: Yeah.

Female: Did you pack a lunch? Did your mother pack a lunch for you?

Lydia: Yes.

William: Yeah, I did take lunch.

Female: You took a lunch.

Lydia: Yes.

Female: And then—

Lydia: You couldn't buy any—

Female: No [laughs].

Lydia: ...in those days.

Female: And who, did, did you have any jobs? Did you have to, uh, like do the fire or do anything like that?

Lydia: No.

Female: No. The teacher did that.

William: Didn't you have to erase the, erase the slate board or anything like that?

Lydia: Uh, board?

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William: Didn't you have to do any of that kind of stuff?

Lydia: I had a board.

William: You had a slate board.

Lydia: Yeah, but, when I wa-, walked to school, Chet and John—Chet was the oldest and then, then I was next and then John. And we, three, always worked, always played together. And worked, worked, I mean, walked to school together.

Female: Right. Right.

Lydia: It was fun.

Female: Yeah. I bet it was fun. I'm sorry. I had a question but I can't remember it. Um, did you go, or when did you go? Did you start in September? Did you start school—

Lydia: Yes.

Female: ...in September? And then, when did you end school?

William: June.

Female: In June?

Lydia: June. Yes.

Female: And then you took time off.

William: Yeah.

Female: Did your father have a store when you lived down in Easton?

Lydia: Oh, yes.

Female: Now, where was that store?

Lydia: In, uh—

William: North Easton.

Female: It was in North Easton.

Lydia: South Easton, yes.

William: Over in Easton wasn't it? North Easton.

Female: Over by the, over by the—

William: Over by the Burton Hall.

Female: By the Burton Hall, right?

Lydia: Yes.

Female: Did he, did he ever sell anything out of the barn in back of the house?

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Lydia: Did he do what?

Female: Did he ever sell anything out of the barn in the back of the house?

William: Yes. Yeah, because I remember there were shelves there.

Lydia: Yes.

William: And I think he sold groceries, had groceries available for—

Lydia: Yes.

William: ...for neighbors, farm neighbors.

Interview: Right.

William: So, he was, that was his passion I guess to have stores and sell, buy and sell stuff.

Female: Sounds like it.

William: And that's, and that's the funny part. That's what, uh—

Lydia: Russel?

William: Yeah.

Lydia: Russel.

William: Well, that's what led him to buy the store in Greenwich because he liked to buy and sell.

Female: That's right.

William: He liked to be a merchant. And, but I can also add to what, after his first wife died. His wife, his second wife, didn't want to live in a house that was a farmhouse. And so, they arranged it. Yeah, I guess she had a brother somewhere that was an architect or a builder. So, they built a house, his first wife, and he built a house away from the barn up the hill a ways, away from the barn. And the original house was below where the barn is. But, anyway, after they had the new house, my father who wanted to be a merchant and all that kind of stuff, then he said, well, the farmers, I can get their milk, and I can make cheese. So, he started a cheese factory in the house he lived in.

Lydia: I remember the cheese factory. And I remember the, uh, couple.

William: Oh, I remember the cheese factory.

Lydia: There was a couple from Europe that, that—

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William: How about Bill Behrens [phonetic]. I'm named after him. He, he came and lived, he came, became part of the family as I understand it.

Lydia: Yes. Well, he was so well liked that he was—

William: Yeah.

Lydia: ...part of the family really.

Female: Bill Behrens.

Lydia: Bill Behrens, yes.

Female: Was he, now where did he come—

William: Yeah. That's why, that's why I was named this.

Female: I know you were named after—

William: They didn't know what his middle name was so—

Lydia: He came from Europe.

William: He was from Germany.

William: ...they said, well, name him Behrens. So, my middle name became Behrens.

Female: I tell everybody you were named after the hired man [laughs].

William: Well, he was, he was part of the family.

Female: Right.

William: Because he came and he took part in all of the activities and my father had him in the store for a little bit.

Lydia: Yes. So, when he died, he was buried in the Quaker Cemetery.

Female: Oh, is he buried there?

William: What, wh-, wh-, where—

Lydia: Oh.

William: Where?

Lydia: He was born in the Quaker Cemetery.

William: He was buried there.

Female: Probably at the South Meeting House.

William: Well, that's the only, that's the only cemetery right near here, at the Quaker Cemetery—

Female: Right.

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Lydia: Yeah.

William: ...in South Easton.

Lydia: Yes.

William: And they go way back.

Female: And that's where your grandfather and grandmother are buried, John Fish Skiff and Mary Skiff.

William: Oh, yeah. They were Quakers to begin with. They went to the Quakers. They had a lot of Quakers in that area.

Female: Yeah. Let's talk about the Quakers because you have a background in, both of you, your, your grandparents were Quakers, weren't they? John Fish Skiff.

Lydia: Yes.

William: Yeah.

Female: Did you ever go to a Quaker meeting?

Lydia: Yes.

William: Oh, yes.

Lydia: All summertime, they had the Quaker meetinghouse it was called. It was never called a church. It was a meetinghouse. And people from all around of the, that area that went to the Quaker meetinghouse.

Female: Right.

Lydia: And it was very interesting because the men sat on one side and the women on the other side. And there was a, uh—

William: Yeah.

Female: Like a division, divider down the middle.

Lydia: Divider, yes.

William: I don't know what they called the people, but the other people that were well-versed in Quaker religion would sit up front.

Lydia: Yes.

William: And they didn't have a pastor but they had programs and concerns about their religion and they talked about that. And the story goes that, uh, during the, uh, Revolutionary War, of course, we were, the Germans, I mean, not the Germans,

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the English were coming over here. And, of course, there were Indian tribes here in this area. And, of course, they were taking over the Indian tribes. They didn't want to have anything to do with them. And so, the Quakers, at that time, were faced with a bunch of, uh, they weren't faced with anybody but the story is that the Indians didn't like the settlers, the people that were living here. And they went to the Quaker meetinghouse and were going to have a session with them. And the Quakers invited them in and come to worship with them. So, that's the Quaker's theory is to have, to get along.

Female: Right.

William: Work together.

Female: Right. Did the men wear the Quaker hats? The, the Quaker men, the flat hats? Did the men wear hats?

Lydia: I don't remember.

William: I don't remember that, no.

Lydia: I don't think so.

Female: Yeah. Yeah.

Lydia: No, but the, but the Quakers would go into this meetinghouse before 11:00 in the morning and, uh, those who were going to talk would face the, the, the people sitting down. They were on a church bench facing the audience.

Female: Right. Right.

Lydia: And one person s-, in front that was going to talk, would stand up and talk and then sit down. And then somebody else would get up and talk and sit down. And that's, that's the whole thing. And when it was time to end the service, those up front would turn to one another and shake hands and then everybody would get up.

Female: Yeah. Yeah. So, you went to the South Meeting House. The big white one on the hill there?

William: Right.

Female: Yeah. Yeah.

Lydia: That's the one I'm talking about.

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Female: Right, exactly.

Lydia: Yes.

Female; Okay. You know what? Let's stop for a minute. I want to see how this sounds.
Let's listen to it. I hope I got—

[End of recording.]