

# Farming Williamsburg

## A Collaborative Oral History Project of Williamsburg's Agrarian Past

Angela M. Labrador Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

### Finding our Roots Introducing the Project

A thriving plant is sustained by its roots. Although hidden from view, roots anchor, support, and nourish the plant that eventually emerges from the earth. Rural communities like Williamsburg, Massachusetts, trace their roots to agricultural traditions; however, in many of these towns, those practices are fading from view and receding into a forgotten past. What are the implications for rural communities' present and future if these practices aren't sustained?

This oral history project, sponsored by the Fertile Ground collaborative student gardening program at the Helen E. James School, empowered 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at the Anne T. Dunphy School to learn more about Williamsburg's agricultural roots by interviewing community elders who grew up or worked on local farms. In cultivating these intergenerational connections, the students' experiential learning as gardeners was enriched with a direct engagement with local history and a sense of the traditions rooted in the soils and farmers of the community. This project's continuing goal is to foster a curiosity and respect for the knowledge that our elders hold and to provide a safe and fun environment for elders to share their memories and wisdom. The project is part of Fertile Ground's larger initiative to support collaborative, intergenerational projects that build a sense of community and appreciation for local roots.

"We were always busy." – Candace Smith



The interview teams with their interviewees. Names are listed left to right.

ABOVE: Shea, Marty, Mae Smith, Katherine, Lynsey.

RIGHT: Julian, Matt, Sondra Thatcher, Anna, Eva.

BELOW: Chris, Phoebe, Terry Everett, Isabella, Nick.



### Cultivating a Research Process

The oral history project was designed collaboratively by Catherine Sands and Sally Loomis (Fertile Ground), Angela Labrador (UMass Amherst), Lisa Peloquin (Anne T. Dunphy School), and her sixth grade class.

#### Student Preparation

Lisa and Angela taught students oral history interviewing skills during 6 1-hour class periods. Activities centered around writing open-ended interview questions that would encourage reminiscence and detailed explanations. Students observed and critiqued professional interviewers by watching video clips, listening to audio segments, and role playing transcribed interviews. From these critiques the students compiled lists of good manners to emulate and bad practices to avoid. Once students mastered writing exemplary interview questions, focus shifted to what specific knowledge students wanted to record. Brainstorming exercises were key, including a "Write & Sketch" session wherein students illustrated and wrote about how they imagined farming 50 years ago. The brainstorming session revealed what students already knew and what they were less sure about. For instance, many students commented on how they thought irrigation practices were different – showing their established vocabulary of agricultural technology but not necessarily a historical understanding of it.

#### Participants & Interviews

Potential interviewees were drafted through the Williamsburg Grange and other networks. Five community members participated: Mae Smith (born 1929, raised in Cummington), Sondra Thatcher (born 1936, raised in Williamsburg), Ralmon Black (born 1939, Sondra's brother), Candace Smith (born 1947, Sondra and Ralmon's youngest sister), and Terry Everett (born 1953, currently dairy farming in Williamsburg).

Angela Labrador compiled a single interview guide and submitted for institutional review an oral consent script that informed interviewees of their rights as human research subjects. Students were divided into 5 interview teams. Interviews lasted 1 hour and were held at the Anne T. Dunphy School. A digital recording device was used at each interview, and with the aid of students' notes, Angela transcribed the recordings for analysis.

### Harvesting the Research Findings

#### Work and Play

All five interviewees agreed: farming is hard work. But the division between work and play wasn't as definite as one might suspect. Participants remembered a lot of their childhood chores: feeding and milking cows, driving tractors, harrowing fields, planting seeds, cutting corn, haying fields, fluffing hay, cutting wood, raising animals, driving oxen, and riding horses. While each task entailed work, many were structured as enjoyable projects for 4-H or as fun, competitive activities at local fairs. All of the tasks were understood to contribute to the family's livelihood, leading to a moral rendering of hard work as "good." Mae Smith stated, "Everybody enjoyed the work." Thus, as children, the participants didn't approach all farm labor as "work." As Sondra Thatcher noted, "work is what you have to do; play is what you want to do."

Leisure activities included family-oriented activities and community social gatherings in an era before television, computers, and video games. Mae recalled winter evenings around her one-pipe furnace vent in the living room. "We'd all sit around the register and Mom would read to us and Dad would peel apples and cut them in quarters and pass them around to us...it was our learning time too." Ralmon Black recalled playing card games such as Pit and Pitch, and both Ralmon and Mae remembered music as an integral part of some families' lives. Extended family and neighbors often visited households on Sundays. Mae remembered, "One of the men...would come over with his mandolin strapped on his back riding his bicycle and he always had a list of songs that we should do written on the back of an old envelope." In the winter, families would go ice skating. Ralmon recalled that as many as 60 people skate at Hodgkin's Pond in an evening. Weekend dances at the Grange Hall were remembered fondly by Ralmon and Candace Smith. Harvest time brought neighbors together at Husking Bees, where the husker of a red ear of corn won the privilege of kissing another "lucky" husker.

"Work is what you have to do; play is what you want to do." – Sondra Thatcher

#### Gender Roles

While there was a rigid division of labor between the genders among adults, children enjoyed a more open system. Ralmon Black recalled his "very early lesson in feminism" as his two older sisters taught him many of the farm chores including "how to milk the cows...drive the tractor...and shoot the rifle." There were a few exceptions; for instance, Candace Smith's father didn't allow his daughters to plow the fields or mow the hay, "probably because if something happened...if it broke down...I wasn't a mechanic...and he protected his stuff." Mae Smith's father wouldn't let his daughters milk the cows for fear "it would make our knuckles too big."

As children grew into adults, roles grew stricter. Men were characterized more as farmers/husbandmen and women as gardeners/homemakers. These divisions were inscribed into the built environment of the family farm. Fathers and male neighbors worked in the fields, woodlots, and barns, while mothers and female neighbors worked in the kitchens, home, and vegetable and flower gardens. For instance, Ralmon explained that porches were designed to provide relief to women, "a place where the ladies could sit outside and shell peas and cut up string beans and not be in the heat of the kitchen." Children moved across these zones with relative ease, pitching in everywhere. When the day's labor came to pass, families gathered together in domestic spaces such as porches to bide their time.

Specific agricultural and seasonal chores featured divided and complementary labor roles. In the winter, Mae recalled that six nearby families banded together to gather ice from the William Cullen Bryant Pond in Cummington on woodshed sleds, "whenever icehouse they were filling, the wife always had

dinner for all the men." During sugaring season, Mae's mother spoke self-deprecatingly of the division of labor, "Sap is boiled by fools like me, but only Dad can tap a tree," acknowledging the special skill involved in her husband's role and her place tending the sap and children beside the fire.

Terry Everett recalled her experience of bucking the traditional divisions of labor while becoming a female dairy farmer in the 1970s. "I remember being in college and all the other girls in animal science were going into the horse world, and I was one of the few who just liked cows. And when I got out of school, I was really discriminated against, and I had people laugh at me when I went to look for jobs...when I came back to work at the [Smith] Vocational School as herdsman it was just unheard of. So, I was always trying harder, and trying to prove myself." However, Terry found that she was accepted as a female dairy farmer upon returning to Williamsburg, perhaps suggesting that a passage of time or the smaller family farm context in Williamsburg made for more flexibility and acceptance of women moving outside of traditional roles.

#### Food on the Farm Table

Families ate what they grew, following a frugal diet of seasonally available or preserved foodstuffs and some families supplemented with gathered wild edibles such as fiddleheads and mushrooms. Animals were raised to be slaughtered for the kitchen table including rabbits, chickens, sheep, pigs, and the occasional beef cow. Large animals would be butchered and shared among extended family or stored in large rental freezers in Northampton. Surplus harvests were canned, dried, or frozen. Interviewees cited the economical nature of their subsistence practices and the rarity of eating out at restaurants like Aqua Vitae in Hadley.

Participants struggled with naming their favorite childhood meals and resorted to recalling typical New England meals such as roast chicken, pot roast and potatoes, boiled dinners, creamed cod fish, and corn chowder that often graced their tables. These meals were cooked over woodstoves until electric ranges were purchased in the 1950s. Mothers were remembered as tireless bakers of bread, johnnycake, biscuits, and shortcakes. Ralmon Black recalled his mother "say more than once that she didn't think her day had started until she put something in the oven." Favorite foods were often those that were atypical such as Ralmon's memory of "store-bought bread as awful good. You know, you take a slice of that bread, and you squeeze it enough and it'd be a little cube like that. My mother's homemade bread – you could squeeze it and chew it and it just wouldn't go away." Mae Smith fondly remembered scalloped oysters as her mother's "forte" at holiday feasts. Candace Smith recalled that pasta dishes and hot dogs were favorite rarities and also spoke of the continuing Williamsburg tradition of baking butternut cakes for the Grange Fair.

"Oh no, Mama, not another  
strawberry shortcake!"  
– Ralmon Black

Least favorite foods were easily remembered. Sondra Thatcher challenged her mother with her dislike of onions, Candace still fosters a hatred of asparagus, and Terry Everett now appreciates the beets that come from her own garden. Although hard to believe, Ralmon said that after four weeks of massive strawberry shortcakes, he could be heard crying, "Oh no, Mama, not another strawberry shortcake!" Mae reminisced about learning to love oatmeal, "when I was a little girl, I fed oatmeal to the calves. And I thought that was what oatmeal was for. And when I grew up and got married and discovered that my husband loved oatmeal, I learned to eat oatmeal. And I do enjoy it now." Overall, participants commented that there

was little choice in what they ate and Ralmon summed up the de-emphasis on preferences with, "you know, if you're hungry, everything tastes good."

#### Changes in Rural Life

Interviewees mentioned many changes that have taken place in rural life since they were kids, and emphasized mechanization, profit-driven business practices, and alienation from food sources. Machines transformed labor practices, requiring less time and people, thus emphasizing production and deemphasizing cooperation. According to Ralmon Black, "Today we have bales of hay, but the tractor picks them up with a front end loader and they're put into the barn and there's nobody out there turning hay by hand – it's all mechanized." Although technology brought convenience, it also brought a shift in approaching the family farm as a sustainable subsistence base to a profit-driven business.

Terry Everett discussed this shift, "When we started farming here...the extension services were telling everybody to get bigger and bigger. All the dairies were getting bigger – all the farms were increasing the numbers of their cows, and they were building milking parlors...Well, it's expensive...so it made sense to try and start small, so we didn't have a milking parlor. And boy, did we hear about it. People laughed at us. Other farmers laughed at us, and they said we were crazy." Ralmon commented on the risk farmers would take when expanding, "Actually, trying to get the maximum production – potential production – out of a cow as an economic unit and thinking of it as a business, is like trying to drive your car 120 miles an hour all the time. And you're always on the edge of losing it." However, Terry sees that we're at the beginning of another pendulum swing back to family farms – "Ironically, it's kinda come full circle, and it's played into...being in the Pioneer Valley and now people want locally grown food."

With the demise of family farms, interviewees commented on the growing alienation people experience from their food sources. Candace Smith recalled organizing trips to local farms as a junior Grange member "because I had one little kid say, 'What, milk doesn't come from a carton?'... she didn't really know that milk didn't come – and in this community you'd think that everybody knew milk came from cows but, she didn't." Terry commented on a general dislike of the realities of farming, "When people are removed from agriculture or preparing their own things, preparing their own food or clothes from the ground up, some parts of the process are a little dirty and smelly, and a lot of people just aren't used to that anymore. Everyone's so removed from that." Ralmon commented on the economic consequences of being removed from our food source: "Most people think that food is...pre-processed, even if only semi-processed, and plastic-wrapped, or fully prepared and on a platter. Many many people eat out. I just saw an ad on the television, 'All you can eat for \$6.99' and I thought, 'My God, all you can eat for \$6.99?' I can feed the whole family for \$6.99!...you can save an awful lot of money if you have a few chickens and enjoy gardening and maybe having some animals...You've gotta be ready to eat them – that's part of the cycle."

Finally, participants observed that in general the pace of life has sped up with less family-focused leisure time or intergenerational community social activities. Terry Everett mentioned that "the rest of the world doesn't operate on agricultural time anymore," making it even harder for contemporary family farmers. Families today tend to send their children to peer-group activities such as sports rather than attend social events such as Husking Bees or Grange dances together on a regular basis. Candace remembered play as focused on the outdoors and more imaginative than today's electronic era, "We didn't have any of this electronic stuff that is out there now...we didn't have TV, so we didn't sit around doing that kind of thing. We were always busy... Fun thing was to go to the tallest tree on the hill and see if you could see the whole valley... most of our fun was...something with our animals."



The interview teams with their interviewees. Names are given from left to right.

ABOVE: Connor, Haley, Izzy, Ralmon Black, Kyra.

BELOW: Sierra, Alexandra, Candace Smith, Julia, Nick.



"It was a wonderful life growing up on a farm." – Mae Smith

"The average age of farmers...it's close to the age where everyone else thinks about retirement." – Terry Everett

### Preserving for the Future

The tradition of family farming in Williamsburg, Cummington, and other rural towns has been receding into history as commercial farming has grown and younger generations have adopted other careers. Terry Everett commented, "The average age of farmers...it's close to the age where everyone else thinks about retirement." What are the implications of these changes and potential loss of family farming?



#### Important Lessons

When participants were asked what important lessons current and future generations could learn from the history of farming, gardening, and food preparation in Williamsburg and Cummington, many answered that self-sufficiency is the paramount takeaway. Interestingly, all of the interviewees' stories stressed the importance of social networks to supporting the family farm. Thus, self-sufficiency wasn't framed as an individualistic mode of independence, but a collective form of autonomy that required interdependence among family and neighbors. Interviewees' memories consistently highlighted labor cooperation between nuclear and extended family members and neighbors.

In other words, family farming actively built and organized communities that worked and played together and depended upon each other for survival. Additionally, community members were depicted as more connected to their food sources and able to live more economically than families do today. Children enjoyed a wide range of outdoor activities. Of course, nostalgia helps sweeten memories, but overall the participants agreed that the way of life was enjoyable. "It was a wonderful life growing up on a farm – it really really was," declared Mae Smith.

Just as the womenfolk consciously preserved the fruits of the farm labor so the family could survive the winter, communities must consciously safeguard their traditions for future generations. This project has provided one model for transmitting traditional knowledge and memories from older to younger generations. Additionally, the interview recordings, transcripts, and photos have been donated to the Meekins Public Library in Williamsburg for archiving. Combined with a growing interest in local, sustainable agriculture and the Fertile Ground collaborative garden program, this oral history project offers a hopeful message of a community connecting to its roots and imagining the seeds they wish to plant and nurture together.