



Stories of Life and Work in Winooski - A Listening Party

Presented by Vermont Folklife and the Heritage Winooski Mill Museum

TRANSCRIPTS

Raymond Roy - Coming to Winooski

Roberta Strauss: Your parents came from Canada to Winooski?

Raymond Roy: Yes.

Roberta Strauss: When they came did other relatives come at the same time?

Raymond Roy: There were the only ones...well, I mean, there were a lot of people from...a lot of immigrants from Canada came over at the time. Because I mean, at the time, most of the Canadian people that came over were farmers. And if they had a bad year, you know, it was relatively tough to survive the winter.

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

Raymond Roy: So they'd come into the American Woolen Mill here, it was the largest industry in the state, largest employer and this was one of the natural places for them to come. Also any other textile centers, hired a lot of French Canadians, you know, like New Bedford, Fall River, Pawtucket, Rhode Island

and the, you know...this is where all of these, Woonsocket...this is where a lot of the French immigrants, Canadian immigrants came in.

Roberta Strauss: Did they come by rail?

Raymond Roy: A lot of them would come, yeah. Some of them did come by rail. A lot of them came, gosh I mean it was only, where my father came from was only about, roughly about 80 miles. And I'm thinking that very possibly they came by horse drawn vehicle at the time. Now of course, the customs back then would allow them to come across on a visa. And if they were good citizens or proved to be...to have the qualities to become good citizens then they'd get their citizenship and become American citizens, because we needed workers.

Roberta Strauss: Did they intend, when your parents first came here, to go back to Canada?

Raymond Roy: Their intention, I don't think so. I think we came here to settle because they had relatives already working in the mills that were doing very well and...

Roberta Strauss: So they came to Winooski knowing they already had a support group here.

Raymond Roy: That's right. Support group. And they were quite sure of employment.

Raymond Roy - Wool and the Mills

Raymond Roy: The working conditions in the Mill were good. Really good. We were, as I mentioned before, the largest industry in the state. We did, pay the best wages in the state.

Roberta Strauss: What product actually was put out by the Mills?

Raymond Roy: We put out some very fine worsteds, very nice fine worsteds. We put out some tropical worsted cloth, which was outstanding. We made blankets. We made overcoating. During the war, we were, well, for example for a number of years, just in the Worsteds Division, using the virgin fibers of wool we used to utilize the wool from 20,000 sheep a week. Now one sheep, the pelt of one sheep is roughly, after it's scoured, washed and all that, is 6 pounds. We used to put through in the spinning department alone, this is only on the worsted end, 120,000 pounds a week.

Roberta Strauss: Where did you get the wool from?

Raymond Roy: The wool was bought by...of course American Woolen was a very large company, and they had wool buyers throughout the world. Predominantly our wool came from Australia. We had an awful lot that came from New Zealand. We had some that came from South America. A very small percentage came from this country, mostly on the west side of the Rockies.

Clement Boisjoli - Family Economy

Clement Boisjoli: So he had to work and he chopped wood for about two years for a Pursell [sp?] man. In those times Mr. Perry, he owned a lot of land in Winooski. So he chopped wood for about two years for him. Gradually he got in the Woolen Mill, and on the sixth floor of the closet, Charlie Dunne, and just roll it up.

And that man that stayed there for 33 years in that one spot. Well, in those days when you had a job, you know, you didn't run around like we do today. Somebody says here, we'll go over there. In that one particular spot he stayed here for 33 years. And they would start at 8:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the afternoon. And you would walk down to go to work in the morning and at 12:00 you'd come back up home, which is about 8/10 of a mile for dinner. He would come back, do his work, and at night come back home.

Roberta Strauss: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Clement Boisjoli: I had four brothers and four sisters.

Roberta Strauss: Let me ask you, when you were young, did your brothers and sisters and yourself contribute to the family economically?

Clement Boisjoli: Oh, definitely. We all had to bring...the few dollars that we earned we'd always bring all our money home. There wasn't things to draw us away from our homes. We all had to bring quarters and dimes and dollars of whatever we earned to go home in order to survive. There wasn't much money, but there was plenty to eat.

See because, after school, for instance, I used to go to where there was, miss...the two girls, two sisters, Mary and Ellen Fitzgerald on Mallets Bay. And on Saturdays we worked there all day for \$1 an hour, or rather \$1 a day, and get our meals. And we'd bring our dollar home, and all the children bring them home together in the pot. That's how we survived, I mean it was just survival in those days. We didn't have the things to keep our minds occupied and automobiles, things of that sort. I mean, it was just...we were so close, that we all had to pitch all together to survive. It's just like a puzzle. You take it apart and you can always put it back together. Whereas today, the puzzle gets bigger and bigger and further away.

Sadie White - Safety in the Mills

Roberta Strauss: How is, how were the safety, conditions in the mills when you started working there?

Sadie White: I don't recall that there was a great deal of safety. I guess there's state laws for some things perhaps, but...now, for instance, we've never had any running water. When we first went to work, they had a great big tank. Oh I should imagine it held 30, 40 gallons. And they'd go and get that full of water every morning. And you came there to...it'd be at the one end of the row of looms. And everybody'd come up there who'd got a cup or a can or whatever they had for water. That's how I met my husband.

Roberta Strauss: Oh, my goodness.

Sadie White: I was right near the water tank, and he would wait on the far end of the row of looms.

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

Sadie White: And he used to come up and get water. Of course, he'd stop and speak for a minute or two, and finally he asked me to go out. He was a weaver. He wove nights. I was weaving on the first shift and he was weaving on the second shift.

Roberta Strauss: Oh my goodness.

Sadie White: His hours was from 2:30-10:30 at night, second shift. And then again, there was another shift that'd come on at 10:30 and worked to 6:30 in the morning. There was a third shift a great deal of time, especially during the war years. We were making all kinds of blankets and suiting and, navy blankets, white, and lots of things for all the armed forces.

Dolly Kirby - No proof

Dolly Kirby: And, I was cleaning what they call the fly board, where the ends of the yarn run down to go on to the bobbin. And when I got to the end of the frame, the belt snapped and broke. And of course I had my, what they call a brush to clean the flyboard.

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

Dolly Kirby: I had it in my hand...

Roberta Strauss: Luckily, it protected you a bit.

Dolly Kirby: No. It just...my hand closed around it and it was sticking out like this. And my...the belt as it broke, it brought my other arm up, and I was tied into that belt.

Roberta Strauss: Oh, my God.

Dolly Kirby: From my waist down here.

Roberta Strauss: Oh my God.

Dolly Kirby: I was wrapped right into it.

Roberta Strauss: Oh, wow.

Dolly Kirby: And all I could say was. "Dolly, get out of this belt, or you'll go out the window. Well I finally moved enough, you know, and hard enough that the belt dropped to my feet.

Roberta Strauss: Yeah.

Dolly Kirby: But the damage had been done. I went to the hospital.

William Kirby: And she had good proof because the belts are greasy. And she had that greasy swoop—four inches right across her..

Dolly Kirby: Yeah, right...all around me.

Roberta Strauss: Right, right all over your apron. Did you see what happened...was there anyone there at the time? Anyone see this?

Dolly Kirby: I didn't make a sound. Not a sound.

Roberta Strauss: So nobody saw this?

Dolly Kirby: I just came out and there was a truck that was turned down on the floor where we put our spools in and it was empty, and we used to put them on the floor, and we sat on them to eat our dinner.

Roberta Strauss: Yeah.

Dolly Kirby: And I came out and I sat there and the woman that worked on the other side of me, she says, "What's the matter, Dolly?" She said, "You're

so white." So I told her what had happened. And if I had kept that dress or that apron out of the wash—we always picked up our wash on Friday night and took it to this woman to do my washing—if I had kept that out I had evidence. I could have got \$25,000. But I didn't have no proof.

William and Dolly Kirby - Maintaining mill equipment

William Kirby: Like when you walk through, the one machine, what they did to the machine here. And here, the other machine over here. There's an alley, an alley here, only about three feet wide. Over here there's pulleys on this machine with a belt that was going up and over. And on here, there's two pulleys here and the belt goes up there and over. You got to walk in between it. If the belt broke while you were going through there, you didn't have a chance. People were just lucky that the belt never broke while they were in there.

Roberta Strauss: Oh, wow.

Dolly Kirby: What about, you take the oil boys that had to oil them, they had to walk right through the whole aisle like that. To oil them machines.

Roberta Strauss: Well, so in terms of safety. It was not a safe place to work

William Kirby: No, it's not like today. Today they make sure that wherever there is machinery, they got guards.

Roberta Strauss: Yeah.

William Kirby: And one day I think they were talking something about putting guards over these gears, but they never did.

Roberta Strauss: They never did.

William Kirby: Never did. I can remember when we had a broken belt. Of course the ceilings were 14 ft high and we had a big rack that would straddle a machine, this machine here, it would straddle it. And we would go up on the

top of there when we had a belt broken. We have to string the belt over and lace it, and then take the belt with a piece of...we had a piece of leather in our hands so it wouldn't burn our hands, and grab the belt and pull it over to the pulley to start, to get it on the pulley.

Roberta Strauss: Right.

William Kirby: Sometimes you'd pull it up, it would snap. You'd duck—it'd go right by you.

Roberta Strauss: It was a dangerous thing to do, but you had to do it as part of your job.

Edward Gelineau - Labor Priest

Edward Gelineau: So, when all that came out in the papers, I was a young priest, just one year ordained, and I was stationed at Immaculate Heart of Mary in Rutland. And I read all that, and I had studied especially when I was in the seminary, the church's social economics and labor economics, and all that stuff about labor. So I was interested in it and read all that.

And then one Sunday morning I decided in my sermon to advocate that the War Labor Board would approve of higher wages. And what I said was that the wages in Vermont were terribly low. And I pointed out in that sermon that the wages of Vermont, compared to New England...were the lowest in New England. And they compared to New England like the wages in the south compared to the rest of the country.

And it just happened that Jerry McLaughlin, who was the news editor of the Rutland Herald, happened to be in church. He's not our parishioner, but he happened to be there, and I guess he called me up. He took some notes, and he called me up and said, "You want to put a story in?" I took off that Monday to come back to Burlington to visit my folks. I was gone for a couple days and when I got back, there was a big story in the Rutland Herald about my sermon.

And then there was the editor—the publisher put an editorial challenging me, saying I didn't know what I was talking about. And then my pastor said, "Now you've got to answer him."

So then I got in touch with the union workers in Rutland. Workers...half a dozen workers brought me their wage slips to show me what their wages were. I wrote to the Washington Labor Department for a little pamphlet they had on the wages in the country, the average wages. And it came just in the nick of time and it confirmed what I said. The actual figures showed that Vermont was to New England like the south was to the rest of the country.

The Union opened up their hall for me to make a speech. And I made this talk and I presented the figures that I had and all, and actually the Rutland Herald sort of backed down. They editorialized, saying well, after all, I did come up with some figures to confirm it. And so that's how I got connected with that. And then I was transferred, in July, 45 to Winooski. And there I got in touch...or the union got in touch with me, and we opened a labor school on Main Street in Winooski in their office and we taught labor economics, parliamentary procedure, and labor ethics and things of that kind.

Sadie White - Unions and the mills

Sadie White: Well, at that time, I was young, of course. And any job was a job. You couldn't get a job everywhere. And, I thought it was fairly good pay at that time. But after a little while, the unions came in, and after the unions came in, we really got fairly good wages then. Not anywhere near what they get now. Perhaps we got \$80 or \$100 a week. At that time, that was extra good wages. Nowadays, the same thing probably pays 4 to \$700 a week, you know.

Roberta Strauss: Right. Times change.

Sadie White: Oh, times have changed, I guess so.

Roberta Strauss: Were you happy to have the unions come and organize?

Sadie White: Yes. My husband helped to organize the union in the Mill, and he was president for several years of the union, William H. White.

Roberta Strauss: I was wondering, was there resistance to the unions when they first came in?

Sadie White: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. They didn't really want the union in here, and they kind of had to, they had little cards that you had to sign up to become a member, and they had to kind of give them to you on the sly to get enough cards signed so that the National could come in and organize the union. A national officer would come in and organize the union.

Roberta Strauss: Uh huh. Who was the superintendent then? Was that John O'Brian?

Sadie White: John O'Brian.

Roberta Strauss: And how did he feel about the unions?

Sadie White: Well, I don't think at that time that any of the overseers were crazy about the union. They knew it would raise wages and they'd have things, you know, opposing them some of the time. Because when anything didn't go just right you could go to the union, to the president of the union, and complain. And then he could go to the head one and complain. And I don't think they appreciated a lot of that. Although, I think the union was good at that time. I think they went a little too far in raising the wages toward the end. And the shipping of the material up here to be made up was so costly that that's why the Union went out. That's why the Mill closed.

Delores Duel - 1918

Delores Duel: And of course during the flu epidemic...

Roberta Strauss: When was that?

Delores Duel: 1918, right after the First World War. We carried little bags of camphor...

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

Delores Duel: ...why, I don't know.

Roberta Strauss: Well it was a tradition that it would help stop or prevent you from getting that illness.

Delores Duel: That's right.

Roberta Strauss: And maybe it would. I mean...

Delores Duel: Who's going to fight it?

Roberta Strauss: That's right.

Delores Duel: When you got nothing else to...

Roberta Strauss: It's not going to hurt you. You might as well try it.

Delores Duel: If can't rock it don't knock it!

Roberta Strauss: [Laughter] That's right. Was the flu epidemic really serious in Winooski?

Delores Duel: Oh, yes, it was awful. I remember there was no school, no church. We said the rosary at home. The stores were closed. If somebody died or you needed something you called and they'd open up for you. Grocery stores were open of course. Pharmacies. There was no movies. Everything was shut down tight. They wanted no congregating, because nothing spreads an illness more than that.

I remember the first woman to die from it. They thought at first that it was a type of typhoid fever. But it wasn't. It was a flu. And then one of our neighbors, the whole family had it. Arthur, Rosa, Lewis, Lawrence...it was six plus the

father and mother. And the oldest one, which was a girl, died. My mother used to get up in the morning. Give us our breakfast. Tell us to stick around home. Go to second neighbors up the street. And take care. And help the nurse take care of that whole family.

Delores Duel - 1927

Dolores Duel: My first knowledge of the flood was from one of the girls I went to school with, Winooski High School. She came in on this Friday morning and she's telling us, jokingly, that when she came downstairs, the piano was floating in the living room.

Roberta Strauss: Oh my gosh.

Dolores Duel: Well, I looked at her and it seems pretty serious.

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

Dolores Duel: Well, as the forenoon wore on I noticed the principle, professor Stackpole, didn't have much to say. But about 11:00, he went up on the podium and he said, "We're going to have a solid session." Because he said, there is a flood in Vermont. And he said...

Roberta Strauss: This is 1927.

Dolores Duel: Yeah, and it's about to hit Winooski, and he says, kids are better off out of school this afternoon anyhow, because there'd been no attention. Sure enough, right after school we all went down to the village and the water was mounting. You could see it lapping on the bridge. That was a wood and...it was an iron bridge. I remember I raced home, told my folks about it, right in this house here.

And, my father says, "Oh Delores you're exaggerating," I said, "Oh no pop," I says, "I saw it." So he got dressed and he went downtown, he came back and he says, "You know, Sonny"—he used to call my mother, he says—"It's true."

He says, "The water's going right over the bridge now." And I remember it tended to want to rain. I remember I finished my lunch. We had pea soup, it was on a Friday. I couldn't eat meat then. I got dressed and I went down and I stood where the Bank of Vermont is now, and I watched it. I watched the men from the different companies cutting the pipes—the gas lines, whatever ran under the bridge into Burlington or from Burlington—capped the whole thing. And we stood by and I don't remember the time. But I know it's the worst sinking feeling. All at once somebody says, "There she goes." And all you heard was [imitates snapping/breaking sounds] the bridge was gone.

Roberta Strauss: Oh my God.

Dolores Duel: The silence. You know what I mean? It was just as if somebody had muffled everybody else. It was an awful thing.

Dolly and William Kirby - Sleigh ride

William Kirby: We used to get together when we were working in the mills and we used to hire a man here that had a sleigh, a horse and sleigh. And we'd get a gallon of cider and a couple dozen donuts, three/four dozen donuts, and we'd go on what they call a sleigh ride. A hay ride. Where they put hay in the back in the wagon, in the sleigh now.

Roberta Strauss: Yes, it keeps them warm...

William Kirby: And we go from here...we go from here to Milton. When we get to Milton we go to a farmhouse up there. They have two fiddlers. You these farmhouses, they have a big kitchen.

Roberta Strauss: Yes.

William Kirby: We have a...

Roberta Strauss: a dance!

William Kirby: A kitchen dance.

Dolly Kirby: Square dancing.

William Kirby: We'd all sing songs on the way going up. All the way back we'd sing songs. But today...

Roberta Strauss: You would sing on the way up and on the way back?

Dolly Kirby: On the way back.

William Kirby: I'd like to see them try that today.

Delores Duel - Music

Roberta Strauss: Music has always been sort of a...would you say a French-Canadian tradition to have music somehow? Either play the fiddle or sing or the piano or...

Dolores Duel: Oh yes, the fiddle! Because my father played the fiddle so beautifully. Yeah there was always...somebody'd have a mouth organ or as you say, a fiddle. Somebody would play the spoons.

Roberta Strauss: Oh my goodness.

Dolores Duel: And on New Year's, when we had the big reunion at my grandmother's...my grandfather worked for...he was a baker. And he used to work for John [??] down here where the Star Bakery used to be in Winooski. And they'd come over with their accordion and their mandolin or whatever, or guitar, and played music for square dancing afterwards.

Roberta Strauss: Wow, that's nice.

Bios

Roberta Strauss was a journalist, teacher, oral historian, and more. Born on April 8th, 1943, in Chicago, she graduated from the University of Vermont in 1976. Roberta had a passion for Winooski and its unique history and “spirit.” Most of the recordings played tonight come from a project she conducted for the University of Vermont between 1985-1989, documenting people’s memories of life and work in Winooski.

Raymond Roy was born in Colchester and lived in Winooski most of his life. Roy worked at the Champlain Mill in several positions, most notably as the superintendent, where he oversaw mill operations. When Textron bought the American Woolen Company in 1954, Raymond was in charge of liquidation and closure at the Champlain Mill.

Clement Boisjoli grew up in a large French-Canadian neighborhood in Winooski. Both his parents were French Canadian. In his interview with Roberta, he discusses the distinct cultural norms and traditions that defined that community.

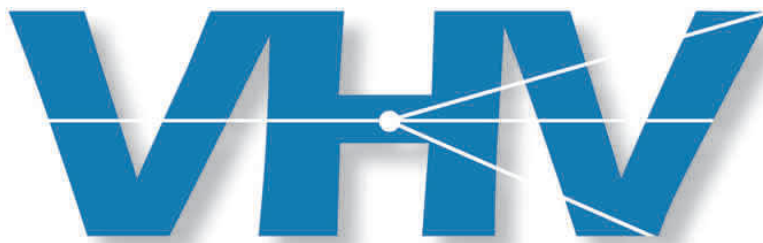
Sadie White was born in Underhill, Vermont, but later moved to Winooski and started working in the Champlain mill in 1916 when she was just 15. She worked in the mill until it closed in 1954. Afterward, Sadie became a prominent labor organizer and was elected as a state representative in 1965.

William and Dolly Kirby were a married couple who were both born in Vermont and worked in the Champlain Mill. Dolly started working two weeks before her 15th birthday and would spend 35 years as a spinner, whereas William worked for 37 years mainly as a section supervisor. Both were involved with the Union when it arrived in 1943.

Edward Gelineau was a French-Canadian priest born in Burlington. He played a significant role in the politics of Winooski. Gelineau considered himself a "labor priest." Alongside his pastoral duties, he was heavily involved

in workers' rights and served as a mediator in the union negotiations at the Winooski mills.

Dolores Duel was born in Winooski on August 23rd, 1910, into a large French-Canadian family. She witnessed numerous important events in Winooski's history, including the 1918 Flu Epidemic and the 1927 Flood. After leaving Vermont to become a nurse, Dolores returned to the area in 1937 and lived with her husband in Burlington.



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