

Ruth Baker Risley Oral History Interview #1, 08/12/1982
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note and Abstract

Ruth Baker Risley was born to William A. Baker and Katrina Thomas Baker on February 23, 1903 and was raised in South Windsor on the South Windsor Town Farm, where her parents operated the Bissell Ferry. She married Robert J. Risley, 27 years her elder, several days after graduating high school. Together they had two children, Edward B. Risley, and Elizabeth Risley Addington. She worked for Sage-Allen for 15 years and was an avid bird-watcher and horticulturist. Ruth Baker Risley died on August 15, 1998.

In this interview, Risley reminisces about her husband, Robert Risley, who died in 1952. She talks about her childhood memories of him, as well as their married life together. She talks at length how he got her interested in bird-watching and wild plant identification and how she continued keeping records of her bird sightings throughout her life. She also talks about the Risley family history and the family home at 1648 Main Street in South Windsor.

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Ruth Risley
Oral History Interview #1
Interviewed by June Cooke
August 12, 1982

RISLEY: —that was my first recollection of him [Robert Risley]. Then he and my father [William A. Baker] got interested in hunting for arrowheads, and of course these tobacco fields, acres and acres of tobacco fields that were plowed in the spring, they were harrowed--in the fall after the tobacco was cut, the ground would be bare. All this time between the harrowing, plowing, and rains, if there were Indian artifacts, arrowheads, they were worked to the surface. And they would walk up and down the length of the field; back and forth, spaced about so far apart—sometimes there were 3 or 4 of them hunting, they would all be spaced out in a line, walking down in parallel lines, back and forth on those fields. My father got—well, both men got themselves a beautiful collection of arrowheads, stone axes, pieces of stone axes, an occasional piece of pottery, and that was the beginning of their friendship.

Then they both liked hunting. They would go squirrel hunting, rabbit hunting, duck hunting; and their interests were mutual, and they were apparently very good personal friends. And I found, even as a youngster, that their hunting stories and their fishing stories—if I kept very quiet, I wouldn't be chased out of the room, I could sit and listen—very quietly listen—and I found their stories far more interesting than most girls do I—I imagine. So gradually, I grew closer and closer to these two, and I would prefer the company of those two men to most of the other people who would be in and out of the house.

Then, as time when on and I was older, a more personal relationship grew up—I never knew how far back my father was aware of it. As I look back now, I think maybe he knew about this—maybe long before I did, I don't know.

One of Robert's jobs was carpentering, and he worked with a man named Alexander who lived in South Windsor. Well this Mr. Alexander had a son Walton, my age, and then this Walton had a daughter, June, who was a very close friend of Betsy's [Elizabeth Risley Addington] in school. And, just recently in a conversation with Betsy, June spoke of a photograph she had found of East Windsor Hill schoolboys, including Alexanders and Robert Risley. And she—in talking about Robert Risley—she said that her grandfather had told her, years ago, when he was carpentering with Robert Risley, and they were working on a shed in the meadow, that I walked by on the way to school, or home to school, and Robert said, "When that girl grows up I am going to marry her." And I heard this statement just within maybe the last year. And imagine all these years, and to come up with any such fact as that, and I believe it is true, the girl and her grandfather were very close. He used to tell her a great many stories of the

early days. But to happen to tell this particular story to my daughter, I thought was most amazing and to have unearthed it at this late year in my life.

COOKE: That wonderful.

[tape stops and re-starts]

RISLEY: But that is the way it was, it continued to grow and it apparently was one of these ideal marriages that has all the ear marks of being a total failure. Apparently everything—I should say—If someone else told me this, I would say that the circumstances would be very much against the whole thing. But there is was. So that's the story.

COOKE: Was it a long time before you got married, after he proposed to you?

RISLEY: Two years.

COOKE: You are grinning like a Cheshire cat.

RISLEY: I was 18 then, and I had to graduate from high school before I could get married. My mother [Katrina Thomas Baker] told me that she wanted me to get married in June, and I had to be graduated from school—so—I think I graduated from school around the 24th or 25th of June, and was married the 29th.

COOKE: Where were you married?

RISLEY: At the Congregational Parsonage. Dr. (s/l McCloud) married us.

COOKE: Who is Dr. (s/l McCloud)?

RISLEY: He was the minister of the church at that time. He was a Canadian professor, I think. McGill and whether he was retired or on leave, I don't know, but he was not a young man by any means. I wouldn't have said he was cut out for a country minister, but he did a very good job for us, a real Scotchmen.

COOKE: And you went to housekeeping at East Windsor Hill?

RISLEY: At East Windsor Hill

COOKE: At the Risley house [1648 Main Street].

RISLEY: At the Risley house. That had been Joshua's since the early 1830s.

COOKE: Joshua Risley had built that house?

RISLEY: No, it was a Grant house. It was one of the Grant houses and he bought it. But he built his carriage shop right next door to that. He made wagons; made very good wagons. He made the Risley plow and one remaining Risley plow in circulation, William Wood had and William Wood gave that to Ted [Edward B. Risley], in Ted's teen years I think. It was the thrill of Ted's life, that that Mr. Wood saw fit to give him a relic of Joshua's work.

COOKE: Where is the plow now?

RISLEY: It is stored up there.

COOKE: Oh. And Joshua Risley was a—

RISLEY: He was a carriage maker.

COOKE: Carriage maker.

RISLEY: His shop was eventually moved from on the street there, to in back of the house. And then—oh—around in the 1930s, it finally became dangerous to use and was taken down.

COOKE: Now, Joshua had a family?

RISLEY: Joshua had 13 children. See, Elizabeth Ann was the second one. I used to recite the list. Robert's father was one of, and he was half way down the list in age and then there were—well—two youngest children, Evaline and Benjamin were the two youngest. And they were the last two, along with their oldest aunt, to live in that house. And then their Aunt Lizzy and Eva and Ben all died of pneumonia, or flu, or what ever the particular illness was that winter; died within a matter of 2 weeks of one another. And Robert inherited the house and that is where I went to live in June.

COOKE: Why was Robert living there with them?

RISLEY: He had lived there since he was 8 or 9 years old. He was born on Rye Street and when it was time for him to go to school, he came in, he came back to the family home, his father's birth place, and lived with those people because he would be near school and could go to school there. And he continued to live there the rest of his life. They helped him in the early days. They helped him to get an education, they helped Elsie to get her education and to become independent and then Robert continued to live there with them and took care of those last ones in their old age. Others had gone on and married, and some had gone west. The all set up their lives in other parts of the country, but these 3 stayed on there, and never married, and these were the

ones that he took care of in their later years, as they had taken care of him in his early years, so that was his true home.

COOKE: Did his mother and father continue to live?

RISLEY: Continued to live out, right on Rye Street. In fact they lived there until the father's death, maybe 1916 or 17; I think that was about the time of the father's death. Then by that time, there were only the mother and two sisters, Bess and Esther, and they eventually moved to a more convenient, modern house on Oakland Street in Manchester, and they lived there until the mother died and then Bess died and Esther moved back to Wapping and that place was sold and torn down; there is no trace of it there on Oakland Street now. So that was the end of that era.

COOKE: What were his mother's and father's names?

RISLEY: Edward [Edward Erastus Risley], and his mother's name was Fannie Moulton. Fannie Louise Moulton I think. And she had a brother Evan Moulton who was a butter maker by trade and he became head butter maker at the Ipswich creamery and there; while he was there, he married Helen Marshall. He brought up his family there. There were 3 daughters and a son. They were always good friends to Robert; in fact Robert used to go up there and visit them. I even went up with him once, shortly after we were married. They were very gracious people and good company.

COOKE: You mentioned the name Elizabeth Ann.

RISLEY: Elizabeth was the oldest aunt, and my Betsy is named for her. And she was, well—Elizabeth Ann, the elder, was born in 1832, I believe. And my Betsy was born in 1932. And it somehow seemed appropriate, as well as a family name, to celebrate what would have been her aunt's 100th birthday.

COOKE: It's a nice name too. Is there a sampler?

RISLEY: There is a sampler that Betsy Ann (s/l Crannaugh)—right—now, that is Elizabeth's mother, and that is Joshua's wife, Elizabeth, Betsy Ann (s/l Crannaugh) who made a sampler when she was 11 years old—at a very young age and my Betsy still has that framed sampler now. It is in rather sad shape but it is there; it is readable, and it's a very treasured memento.

COOKE: Did Rob have that?

RISLEY: Yes, yes, he had that, and now Betsy has it. Yes, that was always there; it was always there in that house.

COOKE: When you moved into that house there must have been lots of things that had been there for a long time.

RISLEY: (Affirmative), There was a picture—a wreath—a framed wreath, made entirely of the plumes of a duck feathers. The very fine, downy feathers. They used more than one ducks. Anyway, they were quite colorful feathers, and they were made into roses and they were a wreath of roses made with feathers. That was one of the things, I think the moths got into it eventually. And then, as was the fashion in those days, there was a hair wreath, flowers made up of somebody's locks of hair, they had to be long; long enough to braid and you had to have the delicate fingers and patience to braid it and weave them. I—they were too complicated—too involved, it seemed to me a very complicated art.

COOKE: Did you take quickly to your housekeeping duties?

RISLEY: I think so. I always liked to cook so that was no big problem. I was never enthusiastic about housework but I had learned to do it; so I could do housework. Gardening of all kinds, I loved. And I learned to sew. Canning, I had learned from 4-H experience, so that was no problem; I could start in like an old veteran with that. No, it was not that difficult. And of course, in April of the next year, Ted was born so I was on the way to learning about bringing up children, and it was a real country place. You could get out of doors. It was all the wide open space so that—I missed the river and I missed the meadows some, but this was next best, and I could always to back to the meadows whenever I could walk or had a ride. So that it wasn't a too drastic change, it was good. And then as the years went on, Robert who had been very much interested in birds and animals and wild plants all of his life, taught me many of these things. I became interested in the birds first through winter bird feeding, and then they began to be a reality, the wild birds. I never had a very good glass in the early days, therefore I had to see things well to identify them, which didn't do a bit of harm because the longer you work at trying to identify something, the more you see, and I think the more surely you learn it.

Well, anyway we had field experience and of course, Robert knew a great deal about all of the birds, so I learned that way. And then there weren't too many books, there were the little Reed bird books, the little pocket sized books that were fairly good for identification. Then the first Peterson book came along about 1934, I think; and that was a real breakthrough on bird teaching books. His methods of bird identification were very different from what had gone before, and it immediately popularized birding far more.

In the meantime, better and better binoculars were being made, and we could afford fairly good ones but nothing too great for a while, but anything was an advance. So that hobby grew and grew for the two of us. Even Robert, because I asked him so many questions, had to dig in and learn more things. We bought all of the bird books that were available on bird identification. We both studied them, and in time, we really knew our local birds from—well—our wood lot way to the east of the house; from there, down through the meadows and on to the river. It was a beautiful cross section of territory to get a great variety of birds. And then 2 miles to the south was the fabulous South Windsor marsh, and there you could have all kinds of water birds from

little East Bitterns to all kinds of (s/l Orioles, Galomils), things that are considered relatively scarce, but which you could find there with patience and knowing what you were looking for.

We could get down there maybe once a week, if we planned it, and of course being in and out of the house for both of us, and by listening and looking we could have a number of amazing birds right there. And I still have a record of the birds just seen from my own door yard. They were either in the yard, or overhead from the yard; or seen from the door yard. Bald Eagle sitting in a tree out in the woods that I saw from my kitchen window. There is a list I think now, of 129 species that we saw right from the door yard. That includes very choice things, like Snow geese flying over, and of course the once in a life time accidental records of things, and that in itself was an accomplishment. And we have regular records for every year from 1926, right though—I still have—the present. I am still keeping a record now.

There were two years that I didn't keep records of, that was the first two years that I went down to Glastonbury, and then due to circumstances, it was almost impossible to do any birding, or to keep the records, was the fact that I, at the time, wondered if I would ever have a chance to do enough birding to pay, to make a list. But I have gotten back into it some, and my list, well—it would be 125 species in a year. I am lucky now if I get to 90. So that has been a good life.

Also plants; wild plants in particular, I am immensely interested in, and I never miss the opportunity to see what there is, either in my own area or any area where I am visiting. And in the last few years, since Bob has had his place down in Marlboro, I have discovered all sorts of little goodies there that still grow in the land where nobody disturbs them. The little rattlesnake planters for one thing. The lovely little checkerberries and the creeping partridge berry. Various shinleaf and [unclear] and some very nice pink Lady slippers there. They have pink Azalea. I presume he has the white Azalea, but I haven't found it. And my greatest delight was discovering a patch of Maiden hair fern that I felt ought to grow in his area, but I wasn't sure until I came on it one day, so that has been my latest delightful experience in finding plants, and of course if I am in any new area away from home, I am always looking to see what there is growing there, and listening to see what birds might be chirping there that aren't chirping in my yard.

The day I went up to Betsy's to pick raspberries, a Warbling Vireo sang all the time I was picking berries; well, I haven't seen a Warbling Vireo in several years, it is one of my favorite singers, and there he was [unclear]. It's perhaps the reason I like the Warbling Vireo so much, he was one of the first that I figured out the hard way when I was first learning about birds at all. We had a great tall Cottonwood tree in the back yard and a very plain, tiny bird, used to sit in the top of it and sing a great deal, but all I could see was a little grayish bird with no particular markings on it, and this beautiful, beautiful song. So I looked in the bird books and I looked and I looked. And in the Vireo section I read that there was a Vireo that had a very different song than the others. It was right there. So by the process of elimination, I finally figured out that I had a Warbling Vireo. But, I had no one at that time that could have helped me any more.

More people at present know bird songs than used to back in that time; they were more used to identifying by markings and didn't pay too much attention to songs. To me it was much simpler—once I heard the song—to remember the song, because my ears have always been far more selective than my eyes. I won't say that my hearing these days—it is not great, it is adequate but it is not great. But I am still as selective about what I am hearing, and of course, as

far as the eyes are concerned, I felt I have never seen as much as I would like to, nor as much as the other fella sees. So that was one of the important areas.

COOKE: You say Rob kind of started you on the bird watching, plant identification?

RISLEY: Yes.

COOKE: How did he learn it? How did he get interested in it?

RISLEY: From a small boy, he just was very much interested in these things and he dug it out himself, the hard way. I don't think he had any help. He had a few books and he observed, for his eyes were unusually good, and he was unusually quick at picking things up. A bird could be sitting perfectly still, but he could pick it out. Well, I have difficulty picking up anything like that, unless it moved. But, there was this tremendous interest in birds, and in plants, and he looked them up; he studied them, and that was it. Then, when he had someone else to do that along with him, as I was doing, that expanded his interest a little more, and he worked even harder, he worked to learn even more than he had known before. And of course, if you have someone who will take field trips with you that is great. You go along and, you go where you might not bother, where I perhaps would not bother to go out by myself; with the two of us we would always make field trips and they were always great.

COOKE: Even after your children were born, you continued it?

RISLEY: Oh, yes, yes. I think Ted was extremely interested in all this, and he would go along on varied trips. He learned identifications. He had the use of field glasses when he wanted them, and he learned a lot. I think Betsy may have felt that this bird business was stepping on her [unclear]

[recording ends]

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