

Ruth Baker Risley Oral History Interview #2, 12/?/1994
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 childhood growing up on Town Farm in South Windsor, where her father operated the Bissell Ferry across the Connecticut River and her mother provided food and housing for indigent residents of the town (paid for by the town). She discusses the Ferry operations, the tobacco farming done by her family and their boarders, and the logistics of housing and feeding people. She also talks about the "Tramp Hotel" on Town Farm and the briefly mentions the two jail cells that were located on the farm.

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Ruth Baker Risley
Oral History Interview #2
Interviewed by June Cooke
December 1994

COOKE: This is June Cooke and today I am traveling to East Glastonbury, Connecticut to visit with Ruth Baker Risley who is born February 25, 1903, and we're going to talk about her life in East Windsor Hill and when she first came to the Town Farms. Mrs. Risley, maybe you can begin by telling us at what age you moved to the Town Farm, what the Town Farm was and a little bit about your family.

RISLEY: Well I was born in the Rye Street section of the town of South Windsor, and when I was a year old my parents moved to the Town Farm to run the Town Farm and to run—operate Bissell's Ferry and to raise the 15 acres of tobacco and in general take charge of it. My father [William A. Baker] had been a railroad engineer. He had had a bad illness and had been laid off. My mother [Katherine Baker] and father had been married in Providence in 1901, and this was 1903 that I was born, and we were living here on Rye Street—[tape skips]

—a necessity because he needed a job badly. He went there—

COOKE: To the Tower Farm.

RISLEY: --and we—we went there about the first of April, and my sister [Miriam Baker Steere] was born the next October. So the two girls and their parents were in this world that was all theirs. The Town Farm and the Bissell's Ferry tavern were the same place. The town had bought this great Colonial house and had added an L part there, and they housed the town people who needed help and who had no one to take care of them. So we usually had from 6 to 8 people living there. They were usually men. Once in a while we would have a woman. There was a Kate Foley, who was something of a character. And my mother took care of these people as if she was taking care of a lot of children. In some ways perhaps they were.

We had—of the people she took care of—one was a Scotch fellow who—in his old age—needed help. He had come from Scotland. He was able at times to help run the ferry, and at other times he was taking care of my infant sister who was all over the place when she could crawl of course. There was another man, Billy Kelly, and he was as Irish as the name. He had a badly damaged leg so that he was—he was not able to walk very well, and he was not able to take entire care of himself. But he could help. He also had the most beautiful singing voice. I know

when I would play the piano and play some of the familiar songs, he would come stomping along the hall—come in and listen to me, and I learned many Irish songs simply because he would sing them, and he knew what they were and he—he sort of opened up another whole field to me in my piano playing along with my finger exercises and struggling to learn the base providing the whole business. So that was—that was nice.

Another man there was a sort of a soul old character. But he faithfully cut the potatoes, peeled the potatoes and had them ready to put on the boil at a quarter past 11:00, which was the appointed time for them. And another man—the name was Edwards—who took care of our two horses and the cow, and then we had a hired man, Owen Paine, who was a good worker and capable but needed quite a bit of supervision. He could do things if he knew what he was supposed to be doing, and you kept track of him. He in the winter helped out of doors. When it was very busy time like tobacco cutting—that's very—he was busy outside. He would get called on. Wherever he was needed the most, he worked. If it was a slacker time, he did the dishes. He washed—that was his job, to wash the dishes and in fact somebody else dried them and sort of kept track of that part of it.

COOKE: So all of these people in your mother's care, they helped out with chores around the place in one way or another?

RISLEY: They helped—they helped in one way or another if they could. It gave them something to do to keep them from being bored, and my mother was very, very competent at keeping them busy. My father was in charge of—of the ferry. He ran the ferry when he needed to and he hired men—Owen Paine ran the ferry when—when it was needed, and it was—there were another 2 or 3 who were capable of doing it if the weather was decent, and the wind wasn't blowing too hard. It—the ferry—was operated on a cable. The cable lay on the river bottom until it was picked up in the pulleys of the ferry, and you pulled on the cable to propel yourself along. If the wind was blowing hard, it could give you a bad time. In quiet weather it was easier and almost anyone could operate it.

COOKE: One person was able to pull that—?

RISLEY: One person was able to do it. If the wind was very strong and if it was necessary to get across, sometimes 2 people would be working there. But usually one person would manage. If the river was very low, the ferry couldn't—wouldn't run, and you had to put a sign up on the street a few quarters of a mile away that the ferry was not operating. If it was very lovely. And there were sandy places in the river that the ferry couldn't get across and also if the ferry had to be out too far in the river and the wagon or whatever had to go through mud, that wasn't always good either. And then of course in the last days of the ferry when there were more cars than there were wagons, the cars were in real trouble unless the water was up high.

COOKE: When did it stop operating?

RISLEY: About 1921 it stopped operating and then my father left there to come down to Glastonbury to be the engineer on Glastonbury Rocky Hill Ferry, and that he continued from— Well he started in there I think in 1924, and he retired in 1938. So that was his life on the—on the river.

COOKE: Now up there at East Windsor Hill and Bissell Ferry during the time of flooding, did you have to be evacuated from that building or—?

RISLEY: We never had to be. We were—.

COOKE: Do you think the dykes are what caused the backed up nowadays?

RISLEY: I don't know what—either that or the water was—has come higher. In all of the years that we were there—from 1904 to 1921—well that's when I left and my parents left in 1924—the water never came up to the house. We were lucky. The 1936 flood—the March 1936 flood and the 1938 flood and hurricane—water did go in there, but we were no longer there, and is has come up once since then. We were very fortunate.

However, at the foot of the hill—going down into the meadow, water would come in—back in from the Scantic and would come across the road, so that we would be on an island so to speak, but we always had a row boat handy, and many a time my father had taken us across up the hill to go to school and pick us up afterwards.

COOKE: Now what about the jail cell that are in that—that section?

RISLEY: That seems to be attracting more attention in the recent years. Yes there were two cells with their strong doors and iron bars across them that townspeople could be put into if they needed to be contained. Once in a great while we would have someone in there that had too much to drink. By the next morning he'd be—he'd be fit to let loose again. We never had anything worse than that.

COOKE: So your folks were kind of jailers too at one time or another.

RISLEY: As I say—that seems to be the thing that most people are interested in and that seem to remember the most of [inaudible].

COOKE: Did you ever hear any reference to the Underground Railroad and was the Town Farm every involved with that in any way?

RISLEY: Not that I know of. I never heard any reference to it at all. No. I—I don't think it's—not any part. I would say that we were not on the main path. We were about nearly a mile off the road. There were a couple of inns on the main street. The road that leads to the ferry from the main street is very close to the East Windsor Hill post office. In that area there were some

inns back in the early days. Now what influence they may have had...

COOKE: Are those still standing?

RISLEY: No. They were long gone. They're not in my recollection at all. So it was before 1900 that those were torn down.

COOKE: [Inaudible] Now your father—did he do much hunting and fishing in those days and—?

RISLEY: For recreation there would be times that he could go hunting and go fishing. In the spring he did some commercial fishing. He was—he made his own fish nets. That was his recreation—if you call it that—in the winter making these large nets from a hard twisted core. The nets were held open with round—with wire hooks—metal hooks and there were long wings that went out from the hooks that would guide the fish into the nets, and in the spring he would fish. He got eels. There were [inaudible]. There were suckers. Occasional pickerel.

COOKE: How about shad?

RISLEY: Shad came later. They were later in the season, and that was a different type of fishing. The spread nets out, walked out into the water, spread out nets in the clear shallow area and then bundled the net up, and hopefully you had shad inside it.

COOKE: Now these nets with the hook and wings, where would he set those up? Like at the mouth of the Scantic or just along the shore?

RISLEY: He had several places he thought were choice for setting up these nets, and he did very well. There were fish dealers in Hartford who would come out in the morning after my father had made his rounds and would buy his fish. He had quite a good business there. Not related to the fishing but of interest to—.

There were Ostrich ferns that grew on the river bank, particularly on the island which was off the territory of the Town Farm and the Ostrich fern grew in great abundance there and in the springtime people would come there in the period when the ferns were first starting to grow, when the fiddle heads were—as they were called—first started to come through. Groups of people would come out from Hartford with their burlap bags, and they would walk down to the river, and they would fill these bags full of the fiddle heads and take them back to Hartford. What nationality they were I don't remember. I believe Polish and Italian were well represented there.

COOKE: Did they come by way of the ferry?

RISLEY: They came by way of the trolley from Hartford, and they got off the trolley at

Station 51 or Strong Road and walked down to the river from there. For some the native New Englanders in my part of the town anyway didn't eat these fiddle heads. Their strong point was the dandelions which grew in great abundance. My family had dandelions a great deal. I disliked them intensely. Later on I learned to eat the fiddle heads. That was much later. I thought they were pretty nice. Anyway, the people from Hartford with a European background—most of them I'm sure—must have known something there that we didn't because they ate them. Now the New Englanders are beginning to appreciate what they have, particularly when you go into a market and find they sell for about \$5 a pack. So that was—that was an interesting part. I wish I had known more of the people who had tripped down to pick those. A number of different nationalities were getting settled in the Hartford area.

Hunting for arrowheads and other Indian pieces, axes, so on—even pottery was a recreational thing, and Sunday afternoons my father and his friends would gather on the edge of the tobacco fields. This was in the fall after the tobacco had been cut, and they would space themselves across the width of the field and walk the length of the field looking so that they covered quite a bit of ground, and surprisingly there were many things to be found, a number of different types of arrows, arrowheads, an occasional axe—usually not in very good condition—and occasional pieces of pottery. Then as they cut over tobacco fields weathered through the winter and the rains and the snows, they then would occasionally cover the ground again to see what had been brought forth by the weather, and in the Spring after plowing is a good time—anytime the ground had been disturbed or if it left enough to be weathered because it was good, and an amazing number of nice pieces were picked up and added to collections. I know my father's friends in Hartford loved to come out for a day in the country and do things like this.

And for recreational hunting there were ducks in the winter. The mergansers were not fit to eat, but the down and the feathers stuffed many a pillow for us. Black ducks were all right to eat, but not the merganser, and for other hunting there were rabbits, and there were squirrels. There used to be some grouse. Not many in that area. Pheasants have come into [inaudible] out for people.

COOKE: How about woodcock?

RISLEY: Woodcock, not too much or at least not that my father paid that much attention to them. We had the little Beagle who loved to hunt, and his favorite game was skunk. He loved it, and he never failed to connect with a skunk. His feelings would be hurt that he had to stay outdoors as much time as he did. But—you know—we couldn't—we couldn't take that. If he insisted on hunting skunks, he had to pay the price, and we just never could explain it to him.

COOKE: Now what about the whole general area there? Were there other buildings in the vicinity?

RISLEY: We had our own barns that were big ones and out buildings. There was also a brick building set off a little bit from the house that they called a tramps hotel. It was a brick building and was perhaps maybe 30x30. Certainly not larger than that, and there were bunks

built into it, and there was a stove and either those who stayed there were some kind soul would provide enough wood for kindling so they could have warmth and people who had no place—homeless—wandering ones seemed to know that there was a place they could stay. There was a—just a stove and the firewood and the bunks.

We children were not allowed to go anywhere near that building. But I used to have [inaudible] people and certainly we never had any problem with them. But that—that town—I think that building was washed away in the—one of the floods later after we were gone. Anyway there is no trace of it now.

And the Sperry Farms which adjoined the Town Farm lands, there were houses built there to—for the use of their help. There were maybe half a dozen houses in all. But they were mostly more subject to flooding than the rest of the land. So the—these never had any very long lasting value. The area between the Town Farm and Bissell Ferry and the Scantic River was a pasture area where the Sperry cows fed, and it was—it was a pleasant area along the Connecticut River, and you could—it was a nice place to walk. You could walk from there up to the Scantic. You could follow around the Scantic as it twists its way up toward the Main Street and a nice place, and the—the meadows—the grassland from the tobacco land all added up to a pleasant place to be if you could get outside and walk.

North of the Town Farm, north of our house was an old apple orchard that was probably in my time—maybe 20 or 30 trees left there. They weren't too great for apples. I know there was a crescent apple that I thought was pretty nice and a couple of pear trees. We had the apple but anyway—the—in among the apple trees when they blossomed my father had a colony of bees, and one time I think maybe he might have had 20 hives. He—after a year—managed to have quite a profitable time. The bees made honey from the apple blossom that was on the trees. That was one of the chief things that was available—clover—and he used to plant buckwheat in one of the fields there. That isn't as choice honey as the clover honey or the apple honey. But it will do and it is—it's an easy way to get blossoms, and my father used to process his own honey.

He would have some of the fancy frames, the kind that—you had little boxes of honey all coated with the wax, and he sold it right in the boxes. It has fancy honey or if you pulled off the top edge of the wax and you put it in a container that twirled it around and spun the honey out of it, and then I think you pasteurized the honey. It had to be heated a little bit, and then put it in the jars, and we used to sell it. Thirty-five cents for a pint jar, or if you had a large a larger quantity, I think it was something like 3 pounds for a dollar. That was good honey. We discovered that sometimes the honey would crystallize so that it was sort of like a brown— a moist brown sugar—little bit wetter than brown sugar. But very nice texture, and we found that some people liked the honey after it had sugared.

COOKE: Oh. Did you have a market for the wax as well?

RISLEY: We had—there was some market for the wax. Not an awful lot. But it—what—what you sold brought a very good price.

COOKE: Did you ever hear a mention—? [tape turns off]

Let's talk about the tobacco farming.

RISLEY: My father raised 15 acres of tobacco there very often, and when it was harvest time neighbors would come in and help, and it was my father and as much people as he could get together would go and help. So it was a community effort as much as possible. But we would round up help from all directions when it was harvest time.

The people there on the farm could manage raising the plants early which they—they grew the plants in cloth covered beds early in the spring and pulled the plants, and then machines set the tobacco, and the hoeing and cultivating was managed by the people there on the place. It was when it was time to harvest that you had to get everybody together and move fast, and I remember that my mother used to be responsible for serving the noon meal to whoever was working. Now sometimes it would be 15 or 20 people that we would be preparing dinner for. My sister and I never worked out in the tobacco fields. There was so much work that we were busy in the house. We'd have our main course or whatever. We raised our own sweet corn, so there was always plenty of that. There would be potatoes, and there would be tomatoes and—we all had a large dish of succotash would be there. It would be just very plain, hearty food. I don't remember if there was ever anything like dessert. It just was food—a hearty meal for people who were working hard and people that do away with quite a load of field if they were hungry.

COOKE: Did you have to bring a water jug back to the field or—?

RISLEY: Yes, and they had whatever the drink was at that time. There would be a little bit of molasses and a little bit of ginger in the pail of water. I don't think it was sweet at all. I—well, the molasses would sweeten it. I think it had a name, but I don't—I don't know what it was.

COOKE: Now after they hung—they hang the tobacco in the sheds, and once it was dried take it down. But then did they have a sorting cellar around there or place where they stored...?

RISLEY: They had—Yes, after the tobacco had been taken down—after it dried and they had taken it down and they had—they dampen them so that the leaves weren't brittle and so the leaves wouldn't break. The leaves were sort of a soft, almost a gummy texture when they were moist, and they were stripped from the stalks. The stalks were hung up to dry and then, as I say, when a damp day came they would take the stalks down, cover them over and—so they wouldn't dry out until such time as the tobacco could be stripped off and put into bales, and then when cold weather came there was a sorting cellar under the house. It was on the north side, so it was very desirable and north light, and tobacco was sorted into 6 or 7 different grades. The very—the very choice leaves went into the famous cigars that that area produced and the less choice used as filler. If you had a year when there were hail storms, you usually didn't salvage the crop. The present method of processing the tobacco—I don't know how many are still saving—sorting these out so that you have choice cigars made from the whole leaf. But most of the tobacco is simply homogenized. It's ground to a paste, water put with it, and this paste was rolled out on rollers to look like the leaves and this is where many of the cigars—this is how many of the

cigars are made today. I don't know how many of the choicer ones are still being—[inaudible due to static]

RISLEY: Back in my high school days we had our first canning—called the extension course—covered canning jar—canning for the first time, and it was quite a revolutionary thing. It was the first that had been done there and Mrs. Ralph Grant was our first instructor in that. She—the people from Storrs came over and showed us how to can—packing the tomatoes into jars and then cooking them in the jars, and it was made for a wonderfully delicious product and did ever so much better than the ones that we used to cook in kettles and then can in our sterilized jars.

We also learned how to pack these in tin and seal the tins and cook the tomatoes in the—in the tins. We—as a group the girls learned to pack these by the dozen. We bought our tomatoes by the bushel. It was a tomato grower over in Windsor and we took one of our big flat bottomed rowboats, and I remember going over into the other side and bringing back 10 or 12 baskets of ripe tomatoes, and those we would can that day, and then we sold our canned tomatoes. Our families, of course, were our best customers and our mothers were eating and serving the nicest canned tomatoes they ever ate. So in a sense we children were a little bit ahead of our mothers where I think we were aware of it at the time and [inaudible].

COOKE: Kind of feather in your cap.

RISLEY: Yeah, we were quite pleased with ourselves, and of course from there on that was the beginning of our knowledge of canning, and some of the girls made up a new tune. And some of them would go to the fair—various fairs—in the fall and demonstrate their trade of canning, in particular, and they had fun doing that. Then this extent for me personally—this extended into my life. A few years later I was canning tomatoes. I was canning string beans. I was canning corn and—for my own family's supply [inaudible] jars of these things. Now the things that were so difficult to can—and the corn and the peas—are the easiest things to freeze. But string beans you can still can or you can freeze depending on which way you like best. Tomatoes you still have to can. But this was—this was the beginning of a real education for a lot of us, and to me it was very exciting. This was our world. We didn't go to other people's houses very much. There was church, Sunday school. That was just about it, and that was—that was our world there. Hildred [Hildred Sperry Raymond] and my sister were good friends. Hildred would come down—

COOKE: Hildred Sperry?

RISLEY: Sperry. And they would lie on their stomachs out in the front hall with the big double doors open looking out the river and lie on the floor there and read (s/l Higgins Moore) books and eat graham crackers. [Laughter] I don't think I want to put that on there, do I?

COOKE: Sure. Now when you were growing up, I know school and church were some distance from where you lived. How did you manage to get there?

RISLEY: We walked mostly the three quarters of a mile from our house there on the river bank up to where the trolley line on the main street, and that was finished by a steep hill to climb when you were going up. Coming back was a little easier. The trolleys ran every half hour, and we went to school by trolley, and that was over 2 miles down to the school. The church was almost as far down, and we'd take the trolley when we went to church and come home of course the same way. We are walking to school—I think 20 minutes was a comfortable walking time to get up to the trolley, and we often did it in 15 minutes, because we'd start [inaudible]. We never—we never missed the trolley, but that was it, and of course the post office [East Windsor Hill Post Office] was right there at the head of the Ferry Lane. So we stopped and got the mail. It was—it was also a grocery store so that we got some of our groceries there, and that was—made it very easy.

COOKE: How much was the trolley fare?

RISLEY: In the early days I think 5 cents for each zone. So that was from the East Windsor Hill Station 31 and then another 5 cents if you were going into Hartford, and then of course gradually that went up, and there was a time when you were paying with tokens, and for a long time they were three tokens for a quarter. For school we had to get to—

[Side A Ends]

RISLEY: —and you could hear them sounding off. If there were animals at night. they would also make a racket. I think there were many years in my childhood times when they used to roost in trees. But later on they learned to go in a chicken house with the chickens when it was time to go to bed, and I have always had a warm spot in my heart for those guinea hens. I love to hear them, and I love to see them.

JC They're a good watch bird too for strangers coming into the yard.

RISLEY: Right—Right.

[Side B Ends; End of Interview]

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