

Janet Prior
Oral History Interview
Interviewed by Linda Sunderland
September 15, 2015

SUNDERLAND: **00:00:01** All right, we are beginning. Excellent. This is Linda Sunderland of Wood Library Oral History Program. I am interviewing Janet Prior of 1042 Main Street, South Windsor. It is September 15, 2015. Janet, do I have permission to record this interview?

PRIOR: Yes, you do.

SUNDERLAND: Great. Well, we'll talk about, in the beginning here, of growing up, parents, and school. So tell me perhaps when and where you were born.

PRIOR: I was born here in South Windsor. My mom and dad lived on what is now 39 Ellington Road. And my dad built his house there. He dug the cellar with a team of horses that he borrowed from Morgan Bradley, and the house was finished shortly before I was born. I was born in October of 1938, right after the hurricane. I had a great life as a child. We had the freedom to come and go as we wanted, and my brother was very adventurous, so we spent a lot of time out in the woods doing all kinds of fun things, climbing great big tall pine trees. And we had a farm. My dad had two cows, and we had chickens. And we didn't go to grocery stores. We did all of our own gardening. My grandfather lived next door and my grandmother, and they had a big garden. So we were always canning and eventually, later on, when freezers came in, we were freezing vegetables. So we had all our own produce all winter long. We had all the milk we wanted. We had—my mom would make cottage cheese and cheesecake, and we never had a day or an hour when we were hungry. We also supplied food for our neighbors, which was my grandmother and my grandfather, my aunt and uncle. And my grandmother had three foster children. We also had a neighbor across the railroad tracks that wasn't wealthy and had trouble making ends meet, so we would always share with them as well. My dad was a farmer—

SUNDERLAND: Excuse me. Just tell me again, where exactly is this? Was this on Main Street?

PRIOR: **00:02:52** No. No. Ellington Road.

SUNDERLAND: Oh. Ellington Road in South Windsor—

PRIOR: Thirty-nine Ellington Road.

SUNDERLAND: Thirty-nine Ellington. Okay.

PRIOR: We did our farming—we had a two-acre strawberry field on Burnham Street, which is now the Truth Baptist Church. And then our other farming was on Main Street in South Windsor in the Chapel Road area and two fields in the meadows. Dad raised—he raised tobacco, and he raised potatoes. At one time, we had sixty-five acres of potatoes. But we were kept busy as children. We were always helping doing things. We had—I had my brother Robert who was a year older and my brother Art who was three years older. And my brother Art has become a dairy farmer, and my brother Robert a pilot. So a very interesting life, as he started flying when he was very young and would take me up in the airplane with him so he wouldn't have to be flying by himself. (laughs) So I got a lot of Piper Cub rides when I was a kid. Tobacco farming in 1955 wasn't as profitable, so dad turned mostly to potatoes. Sometimes our meadow fields would get flooded out, and we'd have a disastrous year, but usually the other years were good enough that we could survive without that income. We—my mom worked in the processing of the potatoes, in the bagging, and us kids also did it. We had a grading table, and we did it all by hand. When we first started raising potatoes, it was before all the mechanized equipment, so we picked up the potatoes in bushel baskets and poured them into sacks—burlap sacks—and then we had to load the burlap sacks up onto a truck, then take them to the storage area and dump them. And it was a lot more manual work. Eventually we were able to get a one-row potato digger, and that helped. We also then went from the one-row potato digger into a harvester that put them into bulk body trucks and carted them to the warehouse. But we—we worked a good part of the time, but work wasn't work back then. Work was just something that you did. You didn't mind doing it. You knew it had to be done, and when it got done, then you could relax. And dad always took us on a nice summer vacation. He always took us out for ice cream. We went skiing as a family all winter long. We took friends and relatives skiing with us. Working on the farm was more of a party than it was work. When we had tobacco, my mom cooked a big dinner for all the tobacco help. There would probably be fifteen people at the table having dinner. And it was all home-cooked food, all from the farm. We had just a few people for processing potatoes, but when we did the field work of course, there were more, and usually families. Usually a father would come with a couple of his young boys. I remember boys being only five or six years old and coming and picking up potatoes and—for the experience—and there were a lot of poor people back then. So it also gave the parents extra food and extra money. Those families are still friends of ours today. (dog barking)

SUNDERLAND: **00:07:07** Come get the dog. (laughs)

PRIOR: Let me just put her—go lie down.

SUNDERLAND: So the help with the tobacco and the potatoes and the farm would be local people?

PRIOR: Oh, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: They weren't migrant workers then?

PRIOR: At times we had migrant workers. That's an interesting story.

SUNDERLAND: From where?

PRIOR: Jamaica.

SUNDERLAND: Did your father solicit those migrants to come to his farm?

PRIOR: No—

SUNDERLAND: Or did they just come to the area—?

PRIOR: **00:07:47** They came to the area, and other farmers brought them in. And then, if they had a slow season, my dad would use them—not very often because most—we had enough of our own help. And a lot of young boys worked for my dad in the neighborhood that even today will say, “I was so lucky to be working for your dad, that he taught me how to work. He taught me respect. He taught me a lot of things. And I'm a better person because of your dad.” And I really believe that—that a lot of those boys turned out really well because they had that extra education and learning how to work, which is one of the problems today. Our people don't learn how to work young enough. They're given everything when they're really young. They don't have to work. So by the time they do get to work, they haven't established work ethics. And dad taught them work ethics. The migrant workers that we did have come with us, when they first came to work for us, my mom would—dad always insisted everybody got fed at lunchtime. So my mom would either cook dinner at the table, or if we were down in the fields and couldn't get back or there was a storm coming or something, she would bring the food to the field. And the migrant workers at first didn't realize that they're living in the north instead of the south, and they could eat at our table and eat with us. And it was my mother who said to them, “No, you don't eat over there on the side. You eat at our table with us because this is the way we do it at our farm. What you do afterwards, that's up to you, but this is the way we do it.” And they were quite amazed that my mom would invite them to her table and to our blanket down in the meadows where we had our picnic. And it was a good feeling. It was a nice feeling to know that we were doing something special for them, that they were having a special meal.

SUNDERLAND: Wonderful for all the young people who were working and for you, the children, to be watching and observing and learning from this.

PRIOR: I can almost name all the young boys that used to work at the farm because even after I started working on my own, after I graduated from high school, I also transported those children to my dad's farm every day so that they could work.

SUNDERLAND: Oh my goodness. Do you remember their first and last names?

PRIOR: Oh, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Well, go ahead and name them.

PRIOR: **00:10:32** We had Doug and Neil Hatten. We had Stanley and Freddy Krajewski. We had five Martocci boys that lived across the street. We had a lot of East Hartford children because I think they came from a harder way of living than they did up here.

SUNDERLAND: Even then.

PRIOR: The parents needed them to go to work and needed them to earn money. Yeah, that's just some of them. And I meet some of them today, and I meet—the children of some of those workers today have come to my asparagus fields and introduced themselves.

SUNDERLAND: How nice.

PRIOR: So they said it's kind of exciting. But back to the very beginning, I should go—I kind of skipped over here a little bit—I went to Pleasant Valley School.

SUNDERLAND: The old school house?

PRIOR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. For the first three years. And then I went to Wapping School from there and then to Ellsworth. And then after I graduated from high school, I went to work at the telephone company.

SUNDERLAND: What was it called then?

PRIOR: That was Southern New England Telephone.

SUNDERLAND: It was the same throughout—

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: In Massachusetts too.

PRIOR: **00:11:54** It's changed—I did end up retiring from there, but I worked seven and a half years there. And then I took off time and worked for the South Windsor school system as a reading aide at Pleasant Valley for Mrs. Rio and went—they needed a secretary after a year or two, so I went—was their school secretary. And then the secretary came back, and I was hired for secretary at Eli Terry. Then they closed Ellsworth, so my job went with Ellsworth, and I had

to think about doing something else. So I went to work for the Labor Department in Hartford for a few—six years. And then I applied for Executive Director of South Windsor Housing Authority. So I worked there for six years—and then back to the telephone company because my daughter was going to go to college, and I figured I could use the money and have more income to help with expenses for college and so forth, even though she did a lot of it on her own. And then I retired from there to stay home and take care of my grandchildren and my mom and dad. And I took care of my husband's aunt, my two uncles, and just a lot of elderly people that needed help here and there.

SUNDERLAND: Well, tell me—let's go back to school—Pleasant Valley School. Can you remember being in the class in the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse and what that was like and who the teacher was?

PRIOR: I don't remember the teacher's names. I probably should.

SUNDERLAND: So you didn't have a favorite or you might remember—

PRIOR: Yeah. (laughs) I remember loving to go to school. I loved to go into school. I just thought it was the greatest thing in the whole world until I had to go to Wapping and travel about forty-five minutes to get from Ellington Road all way—through the back roads—all the way up to Wapping. I didn't like the bus rides.

SUNDERLAND: **00:14:11** Well, you must have walked to school then if you were on Ellington Road.

PRIOR: No.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, you didn't?

PRIOR: I don't remember ever walking to school. But we didn't have kindergarten. We had just first, second, and third. No, I never remember walking to school.

SUNDERLAND: Do you remember what the lessons were like? And does the schoolhouse look now the way you remember?

PRIOR: No, there were a lot more desks and then—

SUNDERLAND: More desks, I'm sure. Large class?

PRIOR: And then—yeah, but the outside is the same. But it was one big classroom.

SUNDERLAND: Did you have a favorite subject in the class there?

PRIOR: No. I liked reading. We did a lot of—I did a lot of reading all through the years.

SUNDERLAND: Do you remember playing outside? Was there recess then?

PRIOR: **00:15:01** Oh, yes. I remember the little boy who put the worm on a stick and chased me around the schoolhouse with it. And the elastic in my underwear wasn't very strong, and my underwear fell down around my ankles. And I was so embarrassed that third grade. I don't think I ever got over that. One of the funny stories. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: Oh, no. (laughs) Do you have another?

PRIOR: Oh, I probably will before we're done. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: Oh my goodness. Was there a well there? Did you have to get water from a well?

PRIOR: No, I don't remember a well.

SUNDERLAND: Or was there a pump for water?

PRIOR: I remember being able to go downstairs to the bathrooms. So there were bathrooms back then, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: No outhouse—

PRIOR: No, not when I was there.

SUNDERLAND: So this would be the early '40s?

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Early to mid '40s.

PRIOR: **00:15:48** Well, I was born in '38 so that was—I was probably six or seven.

SUNDERLAND: So you were very young during the war.

PRIOR: I remember the war very vividly. I remember laying in bed at night and hearing the airplanes go over and not knowing if they were going to drop the bombs on us or if we were going to be all right.

SUNDERLAND: In South Windsor?

PRIOR: Oh, yeah. And you would hear the airplane coming, and you'd just stay perfectly still until you heard it leave. Even though we didn't get bombed in our country, there was always that possibility. And what made it more vivid was that we had the blackouts. I think that was the name for them—I forgot what it was—where they—you couldn't turn on any lights. Your house had to be completely dark just in case they decided to bomb us. And of course we were close to Pratt & Whitney, so there was a pretty good possibility. And we knew that as children. We knew that if any place in the United States was going to get bombed, it could be Pratt & Whitney where all the engines and everything were made for the planes, so—

SUNDERLAND: So at a young age—

PRIOR: There were nights when we—

SUNDERLAND: You were very much aware of this.

PRIOR: We listened to it. In fact, even now, I hear the planes go over sometimes. They'll wake me up. At two o'clock in the morning, I'll hear an airplane go over.

SUNDERLAND: **00:17:08** So the planes you were hearing were going to Bradley?

PRIOR: They were probably supply planes for Bradley or trans—probably in the—usually in the middle of the night, like two o'clock in the morning, those planes are usually supply planes. Today they would be FedEx and all those companies—

SUNDERLAND: Sure.

PRIOR: But back then—

SUNDERLAND: Sally Edlund had remembered taking turns in the tower watching for planes and having to identify what was going overhead. There were people who were selected to do that. Any member of your family—?

PRIOR: No, we didn't do that civil air patrol thing, but my dad did work for Pratt & Whitney, small tool in West Hartford, for forty-five years. Besides doing his farming, he retired from Pratt.

SUNDERLAND: Goodness. Sixty-five acres of potatoes you all harvested—?

PRIOR: Yeah, when I—

SUNDERLAND: With a lot of help I guess.

PRIOR: My older brother was—when dad was—from the time dad went to work, it was my older brother that maintained the farm and did—kept everything going while dad was working. Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: **00:18:21** So from Pleasant Valley, then you went on to—

PRIOR: Wapping.

SUNDERLAND: Wapping School. That was to finish up to eighth grade—

PRIOR: Eighth grade, right.

SUNDERLAND: Any memories of what that was like up in Wapping?

PRIOR: Well, my girlfriends and I used to take a lunch and go down to the brook behind the school. Of course, I don't know if we were supposed to, but we did. And we would put our feet in the brook in the hot summer, or we would just sit there and eat our lunch. That was—the highlight of the day was going—having our packed lunch and going down to the brook to eat.

SUNDERLAND: And taking your shoes off and sticking your feet in.

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: That's terrific.

PRIOR: I'm sure we didn't go down there in the winter, but we did in the summer.

SUNDERLAND: And was the school year September to June then?

PRIOR: **00:19:08** Yes. Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: What fun. And then from there, South Windsor High School.

PRIOR: Right.

SUNDERLAND: Was it where it is now?

PRIOR: Ellsworth. Ellsworth High School.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, it was Ellsworth. That's right.

PRIOR: Ellsworth High School, yeah. Yeah, I went there for four years and—maybe I shouldn't read this into the records—my kids like to tell these stories about my getting expelled from school five times.

SUNDERLAND: Oh! Well, of course we need that information. (laughs) That's the best part.

PRIOR: Well, I don't know if everybody would understand that I really wasn't a bad kid. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: Of course not.

PRIOR: One time I got sent home from school for a couple of days because I forgot my excuse for being absent because I was farming with my dad. So I got a couple more days off. Another time, my girlfriend and I—we were sixteen. We were working—we worked in Hartford for the Christmas vacation in a toy store—but for the Christmas season. And we bought some material, and we took it to the tailor's. And we had it pressed into pleats, and we made Bermuda skirts. And we had a whole outfit. We had saddle shoes, knee-high socks, Bermuda skirts, sweater to match—everything matched—and a little scarf around our necks. And we went off to school the same day with our new outfits—didn't say a word until one of the boys saw us walking up the stairwell and whistled. And the principal [Henry J. Adams] heard him and I guess asked him what he was whistling at. And so my girlfriend and I got a week off from school for that.

SUNDERLAND: **00:21:04** Oh my—a whole week?

PRIOR: A whole week.

SUNDERLAND: So did you do that again the following week? (laughs)

PRIOR: We never wore them again to school, no. My dad was happy because when I got—these five times that I got time off from school, I could farm all day. One particular time, he came home from work, and I had all the tobacco plants pulled for setting that night when he got home. So it worked out perfectly for him. Or else I would plow or harrow a field or—do something. Anyway, I didn't just sit around. It wasn't just playing games.

SUNDERLAND: I'm sure.

PRIOR: And then another time, my girlfriend and I were reading jokes in the *Reader's Digest*, and we laughed a little bit too much in the library, so a teacher sent us out without passes. So my girlfriend went in one direction, and I went in the other so that both of us wouldn't get caught. That way the principal] couldn't catch both of us without a pass. So I got caught, and I got asked where my pass was. And I said I didn't have one, that we were laughing in the library and I guess we made too much noise. And—oh, I didn't—he asked me why I was

in the hall, and I said, “Well, I got kicked out of the library.” And he said, “What kind of language is that for a young girl?” And I said, “You mean ‘kicked out?’” He said, “Yes. Now you’re going to find yourself right out of school.” And I said, “Well, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

SUNDERLAND: **00:22:34** Oh, well, that was a little bit sassy. (laughs)

PRIOR: I wasn’t the A-1 student who he liked at the time. So I got another week off from school. I don’t recall what the fifth time was. (laughs) But I didn’t do anything really bad. Yes, I was a little bit sassy. But the reason why I said that was I was annoyed because he had let my boyfriend sign himself out of school to go in the Navy, and I felt that he should have talked him into finishing school before he went. So he let—I felt he let my boyfriend go—

SUNDERLAND: And you were angry—

PRIOR: And I wasn’t—it wouldn’t be just that he was my boyfriend. It would have been anyone—that he let somebody sign out from school when he should have encouraged them to stay. So that was my retaliation. I paid for that. Um-hm. (laughs) Dad loved it.

SUNDERLAND: Yeah, I’m sure. (laughs) I’m surprised he didn’t put you up to more, so you could spend more time on the farm. Goodness. Well, tell me something about—you have told me about your parents and what they’ve done. And were they born in South Windsor too?

PRIOR: My brothers?

SUNDERLAND: Your parents.

PRIOR: My parents. No, my—my father was born in Ellington at the Spielman Dairy Farm. He was one of five children. And my mother was born in Hartford. Her mother’s name was Weigel, and her grandfather’s name was Brandenburg. And my grandfather was a musician, and my grandmother—

SUNDERLAND: Her father? Your mother’s father was a musician?

PRIOR: **00:24:09** Yes. Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: What did he play?

PRIOR: Five different instruments—

SUNDERLAND: Was that with a symphony or an orchestra?

PRIOR: Yes, with the Hartford Symphony. When he came over—he came over with his two brothers from Germany when he was like twenty-one. He got to Ellis Island. He had five instruments with him. And they told him that he couldn't take all five instruments. And he says, "Well, I need to." He says, "What if the orchestra needs one of these?" "Well, you're bringing them here to sell them. You can't take them in." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll sit down, and I'll play every one for you." So he sat down and played all five instruments, and they let him bring them in.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, that's awesome.

PRIOR: Which almost guaranteed him a job when he got here. And his brothers were musicians also. One of them played with John Philip Sousa.

SUNDERLAND: Wow.

PRIOR: And so they have a history of music in the family.

SUNDERLAND: Terrific. So he played with the Hartford Symphony for many years?

PRIOR: **00:25:02** Hartford Symphony. My uncle played with the Hartford Symphony—that lived next door—he played the piano.

SUNDERLAND: Did your mother take after him?

PRIOR: My mother took piano, but she didn't continue it. No, she became a housewife and a mother.

SUNDERLAND: And the name Weigel?

PRIOR: Was her—it was my mother's uncle that started—or grandfather—that started Grote & Weigel. And Mr. Grote came over from Germany and went in with Mr. Weigel. And their first business was out in Rockville. And Mr. Grote had a store in Rockville. And then they went into Hartford, and they were down by the railroad station in the days when you'd walk in and there'd be sawdust on the floor. (laughs) And then they built the plant over in Bloomfield. It's no longer in the family now. It's owned by somebody else.

SUNDERLAND: Um-hm. As often happens for a small business. Well, that's fascinating. So then they married and bought the farm property?

PRIOR: They bought the property first before my mom and dad did. Then my mom and dad bought the property next door. And they built a house in 1929. My grandmother and grandfather did work in the mills in Rockville for a while.

SUNDERLAND: Interesting. Well, they sound like fascinating people.

PRIOR: They were. They were great people. I had the best life as a child. And a lot of my friends—and myself—say that we wish that our children could have lived the lifestyle we had when we were children and how much better off they would have been before they had all of this stuff they have.

SUNDERLAND: **00:27:03** Were you churchgoers as a child?

PRIOR: Yes. I got married at Wesley Memorial in East Hartford because I was singing in the choir there when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. And then—but I was baptized at First Congregational here on Main street. And I go to First Congregational now.

SUNDERLAND: Oh. So did your parents and your family go to church every Sunday as was typical then?

PRIOR: They didn't. Dad was a farmer, and he sometimes got annoyed with me because I sang two services in the choir down at Wesley Memorial. And one day, when he had farming to do, he got annoyed and said, "You might as well take your bed and go live down there." (laughs) So farming came first in his—yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Did you enjoy singing?

PRIOR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I sang with my friends, and we had a great time.

SUNDERLAND: Did you ever join the choir later or a singing group?

PRIOR: No. No, just my teenage years.

SUNDERLAND: Yeah. That's wonderful. So you did inherit the musical genes.

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: So one of the questions here is, did you get into trouble? Well, I guess we could say "yes." (laughs)

PRIOR: **00:28:17** We covered that, didn't we? (laughs) That was the only trouble I got into. I didn't—I wasn't a bad kid.

SUNDERLAND: And you had—you said you had—was it two brothers?

PRIOR: Two brothers.

SUNDERLAND: And one older, one younger? So you're—

PRIOR: They're both older.

SUNDERLAND: Both older.

PRIOR: Robert's a year older. He started flying before he started driving. He would get a couple dollars, and he'd work for my dad. And then when our tobacco was in, he'd go work for another farmer so he could get a couple more dollars. And then he'd go down to Brainard Field and talk the pilots into taking him up for rides. And he was always interested in flying. He went on to Trinity and was in the ROTC there, and when he got out of there, he went to flight training. He flew the F-105 in Vietnam and was one of the pilots that bombed the Hanoi Bridge, which was a supply bridge that—we kept the war from keeping on going was just to get rid of that bridge. So it was a vital part of the war then. Then he came back and Western Airlines hired a lot of the pilots that were flying in Vietnam. And so he was—there's a book written on it, and there was excerpt in there of his—how he was brought into Western Airlines and how he flew and a couple of his friends. He flew with them until they changed to—I believe they went from there to Delta Airlines. So my mom and dad got to fly for free. And I got to fly for free. And my kids got to fly for free. So we flew out west quite frequently. And we skied in Nevada. We skied in Utah. We skied in California. Mom and dad traveled a lot, and my brother took my dad hunting every year out in Idaho or South Dakota. He even shipped his dog to go hunting with them.

SUNDERLAND: Oh my goodness. That's wonderful.

PRIOR: **00:30:33** So it was quite an exciting life back then. My brother married a girl from Japan. He came back without her and then decided that he couldn't leave her there. He had to go back and get her. So he brought her back here. It was a—the best thing he ever did was—my dad said she was. My dad was really pleased at the end that he had brought her back. And they have two children.

SUNDERLAND: And they live in Connecticut?

PRIOR: No. One is a teacher in Colorado. The other one is a pilot for Continental in Nevada. My brother—that brother settled in Nevada. So it was kind of hard, having him that far away. But we got to see him frequently.

SUNDERLAND: Right.

PRIOR: My other brother graduated Ellsworth, went to U-Conn for two years, and was always interested in dairy farming. And he bought a dairy farm a short—couple of years later.

SUNDERLAND: Where?

PRIOR: In Baltic, Connecticut.

SUNDERLAND: Ah, that's out there.

PRIOR: Yeah, that's near Norwich. And he's done very well. Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Does he supply local milk?

PRIOR: **00:31:44** They ship milk to a big conglomerate. No, he doesn't. I don't know. Some of the milk probably does come into—I don't know which dairy ends up with it or which—but there's not a specific one. I guess it covers a lot of dairies.

SUNDERLAND: So all three of you are still going strong.

PRIOR: Oh, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Terrific. All that farming. All those potatoes. All that potato digging.
(laughs)

PRIOR: Yes. It gets in your blood, and it doesn't leave. (laughs) What's that old saying? You can't take the farmer out of—you can take the man out of the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the man, or something like that.

SUNDERLAND: True. True.

PRIOR: Yeah, I forget exactly how that goes.

SUNDERLAND: You can insert almost any occupation for farm in many cases. (laughs)

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Well, somewhere along the line you got married.

PRIOR: **00:32:41** Yes, 1958 I married David Prior who was—

SUNDERLAND: Where did you meet him?

PRIOR: Well, the first time I saw him, I was wheel harrowing this field out in back in one direction, and he was on the opposite side of the street wheel harrowing the field for Mr. Bidwell. Then I realized who he was. But we got together through an acquaintance of ours. I think our first date was going to the junior prom. And he ended up—he was born in Manchester,

one of ten children. And when he was two or four years old—I'm not sure exactly what age, but it was very young—he was given to his aunt and uncle who lived in this house at 1042 Main Street.

SUNDERLAND: His aunt and uncle? I thought it was his grandparents.

PRIOR: And his grandparents.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, they all lived here.

PRIOR: They all lived here, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: So the aunt, the uncle, and the grandparents.

PRIOR: Well, the aunt couldn't have any children, so this was going to be her child. So he lived here. So that's why he went to Ellsworth. And I used to go to Manchester and help him because he started raising tobacco with his dad. So we dated for a couple of years, and then we ended up getting married. And we lived in Manchester in an apartment for a while. We lived in East Windsor for a while near Woolam Road in a little tiny house. And then we built our house on Main Street, at 501 Main Street—

SUNDERLAND: —501 Main Street?

PRIOR: **00:34:27** Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: You built a house down there. Was that the South Windsor end or East Hartford?

PRIOR: It's near Chapel Road.

SUNDERLAND: Okay. So you were both farming when you were married?

PRIOR: Um-hm. Yes, we were.

SUNDERLAND: And that's how you earned your living for a while, for a few years?

PRIOR: No, he worked—he worked for a couple of farmers. He worked for Shepard for a while. He drove a school bus for a while. And then he—one day when my daughter was a baby, somebody came knocking at the door and said, "David, you need to go to the town. They're hiring." So he went to work for the town of South Windsor in the Highway Department.

SUNDERLAND: Oh. Excellent. Wonderful. So he never had a long commute to work then?

PRIOR: No. No. The neighbors used to say they could tell what time of day it was by the time David went by because he always went straight home from work. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: So you lived on Main Street near Chapel Road. And did you have land there?

PRIOR: It was my dad's land, which he didn't end up approving of after we already dug the cellar, but it was too late. So we built a—his brothers were carpenters. He had—there were seven boys in the family and three girls in his family. So the boys all got together, and they went from family to family, building houses. And they built our house. It was a six-room cape. And we built it on top of the ground because it was a low area, so we hired Mr. Levack to fill in around it. So he came and filled in around the house and leveled it off.

SUNDERLAND: **00:36:21** Would that be Harvey Levack's father?

PRIOR: Father. Um-hm.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, I didn't realize his father did what he did.

PRIOR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he actually started it. Yeah. So we lived there with the—and then the two children were born. Shortly after we moved in there, I had to go to Boston for open heart surgery.

SUNDERLAND: Oh my goodness. You were so young.

PRIOR: Twenty-four. I had a congenital heart defect, a hole between the two lower chambers that needed to be filled. And I couldn't have children until I had that done. So I got that done.

SUNDERLAND: That must have taken a while to recoup from.

PRIOR: Not long. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND:
No. You were back on the tractor within the year. (laughs)

PRIOR: Well, yes, probably. That was my dad too. My dad had surgery in the morning, and he'd be on the tractor in the afternoon.

SUNDERLAND: **00:37:16** So then shortly after that, you had a son?

PRIOR: I had my daughter first.

SUNDERLAND: The daughter first.

PRIOR: Erica. And then my son—four years later had my son David. It was seven and a half years before we were able to have my daughter.

SUNDERLAND: Oh.

PRIOR: So I'm an old grandmother.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, well.

PRIOR: I'd rather be a young grandmother. There's so many things I want to do with them, and now I find it hard.

SUNDERLAND: Well, a lot of people in that boat these days. Many wait till their thirties to have kids now. So they'll all have old grandmothers who will hopefully be as healthy and active as you.

PRIOR: Well, I try. (laughs) I think the kids help, having my grandchildren nearby to keep me young, keep me going, keep me active.

SUNDERLAND: Right. And keep you in tune with the world and what's going on, right?

PRIOR: **00:38:07** Yeah. My daughter has a house in Suffield that was built in—of the same era that the houses in Deerfield were built. And it's a replica of a Deerfield house with all the old beams and all the old doors.

SUNDERLAND: Is their reproduction house built in this century?

PRIOR: Yeah. Um-hm.

SUNDERLAND: Built recently, like in the last twenty, thirty years or—?

PRIOR: It was built in '74. A retired man decided to build it for something to do. So, anyway, she has this beautiful home in Suffield. And it's a saltbox with a slate roof and all. And she has the farming bug as well. She always rode a horse with Dick Woolam's Scantic Valley Riders and 4-H and competed up at Eastern States. So she has her own 4-H club now, which is a boar goat. It's B-O-A-R—is the name of the goat. They're used for meat. And she has a 4-H club with about fifteen kids in it. And she does—they love it. They learn how to do everything. They do veterinary skills. They do grooming. They show in the Hartford County Fair. They've done very well.

SUNDERLAND: Terrific.

PRIOR: Yeah. She has two little—two young girls.

SUNDERLAND: Wonderful. And who you watch.

PRIOR: Yes.

SUNDERLAND: **00:39:40** Who you babysit for.

PRIOR: Right.

SUNDERLAND: Wonderful. Well, so you and your husband built a house on Main Street. It's a little cape on your father's land there. And then somewhere along the line, you ended up moving here.

PRIOR: Yes, because his aunt, who he helped take care of as well—and I helped take care of—she passed away. And then we rented it for a year or two. And since he was raised here, he wanted to come back. So we came back. We rented my house for a while—rented it out—and then we moved up here. And unfortunately he was only here about three years when he passed away.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, gosh.

PRIOR: But he got to live here, and that was the important thing.

SUNDERLAND: Yeah, to come back to those wonderful memories.

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Well, that's too bad. He was very young.

PRIOR: He was fifty-seven.

SUNDERLAND: That's pretty young.

PRIOR: **00:40:48** Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: In those days, heart attack was pretty common—

PRIOR: No, he actually died of an aneurysm.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, goodness.

PRIOR: And not realizing that—he had that pain in that same area in his side for years, and we never knew what it was. Nobody ever checked for aneurysms. Now they do. But back then, nobody ever checked for them.

SUNDERLAND: I just assumed it had to do with farming—

PRIOR: No. He was hospitalized for it at one point too, and they still didn't pick up on it. But they just claimed it was muscle or something. But I can remember him putting his hand like against his side even when my little two-year-old was jumping on the floor. And he used to ask him, "If you're going to jump on the floor, can you go in the other room?" That's how sensitive that was at times, just periodically. And I think my son was seventeen probably when he passed away.

SUNDERLAND: So he got to enjoy his son.

PRIOR: Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: For many years.

PRIOR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. But my kids miss him terribly.

SUNDERLAND: **00:42:03** I'm sure.

PRIOR: He was a good dad. He was always there, always there for them. He never had to spank them, never had to yell—I never heard him yell at the kids. I never heard—never saw him spank the kids or hit them or even discipline them. They knew how to make their dad happy. And they wouldn't do anything not to see him happy—not like today. Not like my grandchildren. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: Oh, goodness.

PRIOR: No, they're good kids, but I just—it is different, definitely different.

SUNDERLAND: Times have changed. When you came to this house, did it have a lot of acreage around it?

PRIOR: The same acreage I have now.

SUNDERLAND: Which is—?

PRIOR: I have seventeen acres behind the house and another ten-acre field a little bit south that came with this house. And I—

SUNDERLAND: Yeah. Did you farm it then, when you came here?

PRIOR: No. We rented it out.

SUNDERLAND: To the local farmers.

PRIOR: **00:43:00** Yeah. Yeah. And then my dad's fields—I have the one behind the house near Chapel Road, which has his potato warehouse on it. I bought that from my brothers when my dad passed—my mom passed away. And I bought the seventeen-acre field down by the Audubon Society house there. They own a big parcel of land that my dad sold them years ago.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, for bird watching?

PRIOR: Down 43—yeah—the 43 meadows. It's one of the best birding places in Connecticut.

SUNDERLAND: Really?

PRIOR: You'll see a whole bunch of cars parked there on a weekend, people going down there.

SUNDERLAND: Yeah. That's terrific. Do you go to watch?

PRIOR: I like to go down, but I don't go down when they're there.

SUNDERLAND: Too many folks.

PRIOR: Yeah. Yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Interesting. When did your dad pass away?

PRIOR: In 2003.

SUNDERLAND: Was that after your husband—?

PRIOR: **00:43:59** Yes. Yes. He was ninety-five.

SUNDERLAND: Wow.

PRIOR: He had been out chopping ice at the potato warehouse driveway the night before. And it was the tenth of January. He was trying to make a path so he could get down to the warehouse. And I came home and I—and I had gone over. And I said, "Dad, you don't really look good," and, "No, I'm okay. I'm okay." Well, dad had a habit of turning the thermostat way

down in the house and depending on the wood stove to keep him warm all night. And sometimes he'd remember to get up and put wood in the wood stove, and sometimes he wouldn't. And that night he didn't, and the house got really cold. And I think he died mostly from hypothermia.

SUNDERLAND: Oh my goodness.

PRIOR: I think he got too cold, and his heart stopped.

SUNDERLAND: Oh, my.

PRIOR: But, yeah, he worked up until the—

SUNDERLAND: But he worked—

PRIOR: It was the day before, yeah. He was out there doing something.

SUNDERLAND: That's the way to do your life.

PRIOR Oh, yes. That's the way. That's the way. And my mom passed away at ninety-five, but she passed away in 2007.

SUNDERLAND: **00:45:14** Wow. Did she live alone? Did they live in their house?

PRIOR: She lived in her house, and we had a housekeeper for her. The last couple of months, she was at a nursing facility because I couldn't lift her anymore because she was, by that time, dead weight. And I would try to take care of her. We hired a housekeeper for her when she lived in her house too, but between the two of us, we were able to take care of her until the last couple of months.

SUNDERLAND: They lived a long, wonderful life.

PRIOR: Yeah. She enjoyed it.

SUNDERLAND: That's terrific.

PRIOR: And then my niece bought her house. So my niece lives there now, which was nice because I could still go back to my mom's house.

SUNDERLAND: That is nice. Wow. Let's see. Are there any stories you'd like to share that we haven't discussed?

PRIOR: No, I think as far as mine goes—I think when it comes to this house and this family that we should do another story sometime. (laughs)

SUNDERLAND: Yes. We should. We should do another interview—

PRIOR: Because this house has so much history.

SUNDERLAND: And you're familiar with it. Is it written?

PRIOR: **00:46:22** No.

SUNDERLAND: It's not?

PRIOR: No. Well, some of it is. Some of it is. But—

SUNDERLAND: Definitely we'll have to get together again.

PRIOR: And it goes way back to 1852. Some—family has been in this house since 1952.

SUNDERLAND: Some family? Or your family?

PRIOR: My husband's family.

SUNDERLAND: Your husband's family.

PRIOR: Or a relative.

SUNDERLAND: Right. So the aunt and uncle and grandparents that he came to live with, it had been in their family since that—

PRIOR: In my husband's family, yeah.

SUNDERLAND: Since that time. That's wonderful. All right. Well, we will end this here.

PRIOR: Okay.

SUNDERLAND: And we will begin it again on the next subject, the house.

PRIOR: Okay.

[00:47:04 end of interview]

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