

Robert S. Starr III Oral History Interview, 10/25/2007
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Interviewer: Louise Evans

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Biographical Note and Abstract

Robert S. Starr III was raised in South Windsor, CT on his family's tomato farm. He attended Union District School, Ellsworth Memorial High School, and Alfred University before serving in the Army. After leaving the service he worked at Traveler's Insurance and then bought his father's accounting business in South Windsor, which he has run since then with his wife, Edith Starr. Together they have two sons, Robert S. Starr IV and Timothy Edward Starr.

In this interview, Starr reminisces about his childhood in South Windsor, including life on Main Street and childhood friends who he has stayed friends with throughout his lifetime. He also discusses his house at 621 Main Street, which has been in his family for several generations, and his accounting business.

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Robert S. Starr III
Oral History Interview
Interviewed by Louise Evans
October 25, 2007

EVANS: I guess what I'd like you to do is just to reminisce more about South Windsor and—

STARR: Family life was different.

EVANS: All right, tell me about that.

STARR: Every Sunday afternoon, we had—the family got together and had a complete dinner at the dining room table and every night we had—the family sat down together and ate together. Kind of doesn't happen today, I guess. That was where I would usually get grilled about my day to find out what I did wrong so I could get chewed out.

EVANS: So, is that something you did in your family?

STARR: Yeah.

EVANS: Okay.

STARR: Most families. Every 5 o'clock, we would get called in for dinner. If we were playing baseball, we had to stop.

EVANS: Okay.

STARR: You asked me what I did wrong. I did one thing wrong.

EVANS: Okay.

STARR: We snuck into a man's swimming pool one night, about midnight.

EVANS: Into a man's swimming pool?

STARR: A family swimming pool—one night about midnight. I had my father's, car and I parked it on the street so we could sneak in—and of course we went in the man's pool, and he came out with a shotgun, and he started shootin'—in the air I'm sure—and all us kids ran,

grabbed our clothes, and just ran like heck. And a neighbor had a septic tank open and I ran right into it—

EVANS: Oh my goodness.

STARR: And lost the keys to my father's car too.

EVANS: I only know one family who might have had a swimming pool in those days. Do you think I'm correct? You don't need to mention their name.

STARR: It was Holsom's I think. It was over on the other side of town.

EVANS: Oh, all right—so you got over to the other side of town some.

STARR: Well, we would just—you know—go to a movie. We'd hang out.

EVANS: When did you learn to drive a car?

STARR: I guess probably about 9 years old. On the farm, we drove tractors and cars and—probably about 9 years old I started. In fact, I used to sit on a Coca-Cola case so I that could reach the pedals.

EVANS: When did you meet, and how did you meet Edie?

STARR: I met Edie on a blind date—when did I meet her? Probably about 1960—1960, I think? It was a blind date.

EVANS: Where did she live?

STARR: East Hartford. No, sorry, she lived in Hartford—Tower Avenue.

EVANS: Oh, but she has some connection with South Windsor anyway, does she not?

STARR: She does, because her grandfather—great-grandfather, excuse me—was a Dr. Deane, who lived where probably Bobby Peck lives today.

EVANS: Way up by the East Windsor Hill post office, right? All right, but she lived in Hartford, and you met her on a blind date.

STARR: Yep. Our first night together—our first date we went out shooting rats.

EVANS: That's what I was going to say—what were your dates like?

STARR: We went down behind the barn and shot rats.

EVANS: The barn here—?

STARR: Right down there.

EVANS: Right down there. Oh my goodness.

STARR: I had a rat problem in my barn, so we went down to take care of that.

EVANS: And she liked doing that?

STARR: I don't think so. We used to we'd go water-skiing and we'd go down to the shore and go up to Lane's cottages and—you know—that sort of thing.

EVANS: I wonder if this is still working. Yes, I think it is. I wonder would it be asking too much to have you back over what you told me early on.

STARR: My name?

EVANS: That's right.

STARR: My name is Robert S. Starr III. I live at 621 Main Street, South Windsor, Connecticut. I was born in Hartford Hospital, lived in South Windsor all my life, except for a short stay in the Army. I went to Union School, and then I went to Ellsworth High School, then I went on to Alfred University, stayed there about a year, and then decided to join the Army. After I got out of the service, I had to do my education at night—which I wouldn't recommend—and then I went to work for Traveler's Insurance Company. My father was an accountant in South Windsor, and I left the insurance company and went to work for him. After his stroke, I took over the business, and I've been in accounting for over 40 years at the same place in South Windsor.

As a youngster in school, my friends were Donny Burr, Timmy Shepard [Charles Beach "Tim" Shepard], Kippy Shepard [Jean E. "Kip" Shepard, III], Tommy Surber, Dave Woodmansee—

EVANS: Who was that last one?

STARR: Dave Woodmansee.

EVANS: Oh. All right.

STARR: His father [Merle B. Woodmansee] was superintendent of the schools when we were in high school.

EVANS: I remember Woodmansee.

STARR: In fact, we still get together once a month for dinner. For fun things, we all got together and we played baseball. We just got together on the field and made our own entertainment. Did a lot of fishing in the Connecticut River. Most of us had horses, so we did a lot of horseback riding.

EVANS: What kind of fish did you get out of the Connecticut?

STARR: You name it. Eels—I hate the eels—eels, catfish, perch, some sunfish—

EVANS: Were the sunfish in the Connecticut, or were they sometimes in the meadows and swampy areas?

STARR: No, in the river.

EVANS: All right. Okay, and I have down—you had mentioned your teachers at Union as being Mrs. Freitag [Gertrude Freitag], Mrs. Lukas, Mrs. Macinder, Mrs. Couch and—you think—Mr. Cotton.

STARR: Yep. I'm not sure about the 5th grade teacher—

EVANS: Right.

STARR: Because when you got to that age, you had different teachers for different classes. You had the same room, but they came in—different teachers—

EVANS: You told me a really neat story about something that happened to some people in the way of discipline up at Ellsworth School. Could you repeat that?

STARR: When you went to high school at Ellsworth, if you were a senior, you were the only people allowed to use the front steps—and there were a lot of them. If you got caught walking up the front steps, and you were not a senior, you had to scrub the steps with a toothbrush.

EVANS: Sounds like fun. Do you know—?

STARR: I never did it.

EVANS: Do you know people who did it—I mean, you did see people do that.

STARR: I don't know who they were. I don't remember, anyway.

EVANS: It all right. You don't want to tell tales out of school, right? And then we were talking also about some of the people whom you knew—the adults whom you knew when you were young who were important figures in South Windsor.

STARR: All the people who lived on Main Street were—most of them were farmers.

EVANS: Well, it was a First Selectman form of government. Can you remember some of the people who were First Selectman?

STARR: Charlie Enes was the town clerk. I remember Hotty Vibert—he was a judge.

EVANS: What was his first name?

STARR: Hotty. H-O—I don't even know how to spell that. Joe can tell you that.

EVANS: All right.

STARR: And Charlie Jurgelas was the town constable.

EVANS: And he was the one you were telling me about—your feelings about Charlie Jurgelas.

STARR: You never got in trouble because he'd bring you home—and that was the worst thing that could happen to you. Back in those days, they had a thing called “tobacco lathe”—you usually took one across the behind.

EVANS: What was it, a tobacco what—?

STARR: Tobacco lathe.

EVANS: Oh, “lathe”. Oh, all right—tobacco lathe. All right, tobacco lathe. Did you ever get that?

STARR: Oh yes.

EVANS: Can you remember the circumstances?

STARR: One time—I lost my father's car keys in the septic tank.

EVANS: That sounds deserving of it, doesn't it?

STARR: Yep.

EVANS: During high school, your friends remained pretty much the same, or were there people coming from East Windsor at that time, or—?

STARR: No. Most of them were—

EVANS: Most were just South Windsor.

STARR: Yep.

EVANS: Now, you have children?

STARR: I have children. I have—my son, Robert S. Starr IV—I wouldn't recommend it because of the postage nightmare. And I have another son, Timothy Edward Starr.

EVANS: And, when you say it's a postage nightmare, because people fail to put the "IV" or "III" in—?

STARR: Yeah, after they get older and they move to different places, the mail goes everywhere.

EVANS: I see. Okay, where does he live?

STARR: Bobby lives in Barre, Vermont. He has two daughters, Lisa Starr and Bailey Starr. And Timothy lives in back of—in the rear of 621 Main, right down here, and he has one daughter named Hannah.

EVANS: You have three granddaughters.

STARR: Three granddaughters, yes.

EVANS: How about the early days of your marriage—what were some of the joys or problems that you might think of?

STARR: They're all joys.

EVANS: Good.

STARR: Probably the hardest part was trying to make ends meet. We didn't have any money when we just started out, and trying to make things work.

EVANS: That would have been, you say, in the early 60s.

STARR: Right, yep. And it really doesn't get a whole lot better as you get older, but it does get—maybe you learn to manage it better. I don't know. That would probably be the hardest thing, trying to get—you know—putting together enough money to buy the house I live in now.

I could tell you a story about when I went to buy this house. I had—it was for sale—I had it appraised and I had to get a mortgage, so I went to the Bank of South Windsor—back when it was the Bank of South Windsor—and Enoch Pelton was on the board, and he came to check out the house to see if I could get the mortgage. I asked for a mortgage of \$19,500, and when he walked out the house, he said, "We're not gonna give it to you." My heart fell. So I said, "Enoch, it's gotta be worth that." And he said, "No, we're gonna give you \$40,000, cause it's gonna take you that much to put it back together." And that's what happened. He was right.

EVANS: It's a beautiful house—no doubt about it.

STARR: We did a lot of work on it.

EVANS: So it was really in bad shape when you got it?

STARR: My grandmother was in a convalescent home for 10 years. They just closed it down—the ceilings were falling and paper was coming off the walls and all that—and everybody thought I was crazy.

EVANS: And today, do people still think that?

STARR: No, but—how we did it was—our friends all got together and we all did the work. I helped them on their house; they helped me on my house and whatever. That's how we did it in those days. We never had money to do it, but we learned how to sheetrock; we learned how to be a carpenter; we learned how to do all that stuff.

EVANS: With a good deal of success. Nice ceiling in here.

STARR: That was original.

EVANS: That's original?

STARR: Yeah. The porch—this porch is new.

EVANS: Was this always an enclosed porch?

STARR: No, it was an open porch. And the termites ate it away on me, so my son Timmy did this. He built this.

EVANS: And he's doing pretty well as a carpenter, is he?

STARR: He's doing that big building up at Gale's right now. Have you seen that barn up there?

EVANS: Up at Gale's? Oh, okay.

STARR: [Inaudible.] You drive by the road and see that barn?

EVANS: I haven't noticed that specifically.

STARR: When you go home, you take a right up Newberry Road.

EVANS: He did that. So you're very proud of his ability to—

STARR: He's very good at working with wood, and he's blending the old and the new and etc.

EVANS: Did he learn some of those things from you when he was young?

STARR: Nope. No he didn't, no.[laughs]

EVANS: Well if it's like my house, there were so many years that we were working on it, doing things.

STARR: He actually went to school to be a plumber, and then he got into this.

EVANS: That's all right. He's doing well. What does the one up in Barre, Vermont do? What does—

STARR: He works for an oil company, who owns about 200 gas stations in New Hampshire, Vermont and New York. He's in charge of those gas stations—to make sure they're running properly.

EVANS: Good. There must be some stories about your parents or aunts and uncles, cousins, something of that sort that you could tell me—?

STARR: I don't know what to—

EVANS: You're at a loss for words—that's unbelievable.

STARR: Yeah, I mean—they were just normal parents.

EVANS: They were normal, oh that's good. [laughs]

STARR: I mean, we used to go—we'd always go to Lake Champlain for vacation, fishing. And sometimes in Canada.

EVANS: Did you have a cabin or something up in Lake Champlain?

STARR: My father owned a house on Lake Champlain, up at Chimney Point. Also my grandmother, who owned this house, had a place in Crystal Lake in New Hampshire—she owned the whole side of the lake up there, so we had free run of that place.

EVANS: And with doing all the farming and raising all the tomatoes, how was there time to go do those things?

STARR: Well—first of all—in those days, 91 was not there. So when I got my license, I had to drive my grandmother—she would spend the whole summer up there—I would have to drive my grandmother up there and take a train back. So I spent some time up there when I drove her there.

EVANS: That would be nice. The whole family was able to get away to go to Lake Champlain?

STARR: Not usually for weeks. That was when things got older—when we got older. Dad wasn't farming then when we—we used to go up fishing and stay at a fishing camp, but then he bought his place, he wasn't farming anymore. I can't think of any stories to tell—I could tell you some stories, but I probably shouldn't.

EVANS: All right, I don't want anything that you shouldn't tell. I'm just trying to—just wanted to find out as much as I can about what life was like for a young boy in the 50s.

STARR: Personally I think it was better than it is today for young people. We were always busy. We never got in trouble—very much.

EVANS: Did your parents have to put rules, like where you could go and so on, or were you given pretty much free range?

STARR: Oh no. They knew where we were. The meadow was no problem in those days—we had free range of that. If we wanted to go someplace, to somebody's house or something, we got curfews. If we wanted to go the movie, we had to be home at certain times.

EVANS: You're right. You said you had dinner usually at 5. You must have gotten up very early in the morning, at least when your dad was farming—that must have been true.

STARR: We used to—well, when the tomato season came in, we had to be up early in the morning and we would be wiping tomatoes until 10 or 11 o'clock at night, and then the next morning had to be down to the Farmer's Market at 4 o'clock to deliver your goods—in a big ol' flatbed truck.

EVANS: So you picked the tomatoes, then you wiped each one of them.

STARR: Each one of them, they get packed in the basket. Back in those days, it was a peach basket—about half a bushel—not like today, where they have handles. You'd take them down to the Farmer's Market in Hartford, and that's where you sell them.

EVANS: And what time would you have to be at the Farmer's Market?

STARR: Probably about 4:30.

EVANS: And was that one day a week?

STARR: That was one day—usually—well, usually twice a week. Usually probably a Wednesday and a Saturday.

EVANS: You chose those days—it was open other days?

STARR: It was open every day. My father had a consignment—one person took all the tomatoes. It's not like we—

EVANS: I see, you didn't stay and sell them.

STARR: No, no. We just delivered them. One person took them—Cohen was the name of them—they took all the tomatoes, and they took a 15% commission, or whatever it was.

EVANS: It wasn't the Cohens here on Main Street—?

STARR: No.

EVANS: So sometimes you got to go into the Farmer's Market.

STARR: Stopped for breakfast on the way home.

EVANS: So you actually would spend all day down in the meadow, fishing in the river and—

STARR: Yep, fishing, yep. Or just walking around looking for wildlife or whatever.

EVANS: And you never went swimming because your parents had said no.

STARR: I fell in the river—fell out of a boat in the river—but I never jumped in the river to go swimming, because the rumor around—which was probably true—was that the river was very dangerous because there were a lot of whirlpools in that river. We never went in there. Now, we did have a swimming hole in the Podunk, right down here. We would go swimming in the Podunk River over here. We had a little tire swing over the Podunk and we had a little place that we—

EVANS: You didn't go to Spring Pond?

STARR: Yes we did, yep; high board.

EVANS: Now Veteran's Memorial Park.

STARR: Yeah. And if you hit the mud in the bottom, you did good—you got down deep. Mrs. Coles owned that. I think it was, like, 25 cents to get in or something—it was unbelievable.

EVANS: They charged to get in, even--?

STARR: Mrs. Coles—this was before the town owned it—there was a Mrs. Coles who owned that. And she ran a little concession stand there.

EVANS: How about—now the Russaks had—did you know the Russaks down on King Street?

STARR: I did. They had a pond down there. We never went down there too much to go swimming. I did go swimming down there, but I never—we never hung out down there.

EVANS: How about the quarry? Did you ever swim in the quarry?

STARR: Nope.

EVANS: I mean, up on Strong Road or anything?

STARR: No. No, that was taboo.

EVANS: It's interesting, because one of mine did swim there once, at a birthday party.

STARR: Thought about it.

EVANS: So it sounds like you were a pretty good little boy. I mean, as kids go—I mean, you pretty much followed the rules.

STARR: I got in trouble—I guess I got in trouble one night with my parents. I don't know if you want to hear that. My father brought a brand new Buick—I'll never forget it—and he let me take it. I hit the hill by the Blast and Cast up on Rye Street at about 100 miles an hour. And when I came down on the other side of the railroad tracks, all the chrome fell off the car. So—I got out—and back in those days, they had little clips to put the chrome back on, so we put all the chrome back on, went home. Next morning, my father got up, slammed the car door, and all the chrome fell off in the driveway. So he took it back to the dealer, cause he figured it was defective. Had all new chrome put on right.

EVANS: And did you ever fess up to that?

STARR: No I did not.

EVANS: Whoa.

STARR: No I did not.

EVANS: I'm going to skip in time a little bit. You talked about your father's accounting business and how you took that over. When you took it over—or when you came back to work in it—that was then you—after his stroke was when you came back to work in it.

STARR: No, I worked—I worked part-time from 1964-1968. I got my license in 1968, and that's when I left the Traveler's Insurance Company and started full-time with dad. And then when dad had the stroke, I bought the business from him.

EVANS: So there were quite a few customers already.

STARR: Oh yeah.

EVANS: So you talked about hard times beginning. Your father was making a living off it, wasn't he? So—did you have trouble keeping some of the customers, or they usually—

STARR: Never lost a customer.

EVANS: They usually stayed with you.

STARR: I never lost a customer—unless I wanted to.

EVANS: Okay. So that was good.

STARR: When I went to work for him, we started building the business up more, trying to support two people.

EVANS: Did your wife—did Edie always work with you?

STARR: In the beginning, she stayed home with the kids, and she would answer the telephone, and she would do bookwork at home.

EVANS: So you had a telephone that rang in here as well as out there?

STARR: Right—it was up at the other house, is where we were, so—

EVANS: Oh, all right. So you were working down here where you work now—even when you were living up at the other house.

STARR: No, I worked at Shepard's warehouse. Our office was at Shepherd's warehouse. Then we renovated this building—I want to say around 1968 or so.

EVANS: All right, so—let's see if I have it straight—your father had his business up in Shepard's warehouse, and that's where you went to work to begin with—

STARR: Exactly.

EVANS: And then you bought this property where you live now, and then renovated the—

STARR: But I only bought this house. My father owned the office.

EVANS: Oh, I see.

STARR: Right. I only bought the house.

EVANS: Oh, so he—

STARR: He bought the house—he bought the farm from my grandfather, okay? But not the house.

EVANS: I see. All right, all right.

STARR: Then he renovated the office and then—that's when we moved down there.

EVANS: So it was a gradual transition.

STARR: Right.

EVANS: So when you first lived here in the house, you were still going back up to the Shepard's place to work?

STARR: Basically, yeah. And then we renovated that.

EVANS: Did you find that really a lot of boyhood friends who helped you, or where they?

STARR: No—on this house?

EVANS: Right.

STARR: No. Well, mostly Bill Woods, who—Sally Newberry—married to Sally Newberry, who lived where Gale lives right now—we did those two houses. But basically—and friends came—if I needed a new roof, everybody would come and help. Everybody. David Slaine was an electrician, and he came and helped me—you know—do the wiring.

EVANS: And these people were mostly your friends before that time--?

STARR: Right.

EVANS: Other young married people?

STARR: About the same age—

EVANS: Around the same age as you—but they were not necessarily people you went to high school with and so on—or some were?

STARR: Some were, yep. Some were.

EVANS: So you've found that a lot of people whom you went to high school with still live in South Windsor, or did at that time?

STARR: No.

EVANS: Most of them moved away?

STARR: Most of them moved away.

EVANS: What, do you think, caused them to move away and you stay?

STARR: People ask me that question—I really don't know. I mean, I like where I live. I like—I like Main Street. My wife says I'll never leave—they'll carry me out of here.

EVANS: In other words, you have sentimental feelings about—

STARR: Roots, I guess I call it.

EVANS: Roots. Okay, good. I'm sure that's very possible.

STARR: And I'm not sure that a lot of people want to take on the challenge of doing—you know—some of these old houses needed a lot of work back then. They were in tough shape and not actually a lot of people wanted to take them on.

EVANS: It's amazing. How large is the house? I mean, how many rooms does it have?

STARR: It's got 14 rooms.

EVANS: Fourteen rooms—big house.

STARR: Yeah, we fill them up at Christmas time. We use the dining room at Christmas and Thanksgiving. We basically live in a couple rooms.

EVANS: This porch—that would be considered one of the rooms?

STARR: Yep.

EVANS: Because it's now all enclosed. But you mentioned that it was once open.

STARR: Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve—yep. Yep, it would be considered a room.

EVANS: And you must have a lot of things in your house that belonged to your grandmother and grandfather.

STARR: We have some, but my father and I have sold most of them off. There was a big auction when my grandmother died—big auction—and highboys and all that stuff went—unfortunately.

EVANS: I know. We always say that afterwards, and yet at the time it seems like people really feel they need to do it.

STARR: Basically—not too many family pieces—there’s a secretary and things like that, that my wife inherited from my aunt—some of those things. But most of it was sold.

EVANS: And did the boys—your two boys—ever work with you in the accounting business?

STARR: No.

EVANS: They never helped in any way with that.

STARR: They had no desire.

EVANS: Had no interest.

STARR: Basically, they didn’t like the hours, I’m sure.

EVANS: You sort of liked the hours, though, I feel. Why—what do you like about the hours you have?

STARR: Well, to get it done you have to work, and sometimes you have to work from midnight or whatever just to get a job done. I mean, if you don’t do that, you don’t get it done. I’ve never been afraid of work, I guess.

EVANS: In other words, what are the good things about your job—if you had to tell someone the good things about it?

STARR: The good thing about my job is that I got nice people for customers that—you know—more like friends than customers.

EVANS: Don’t you feel—or maybe you’ve never thought about it—but isn’t that because you’re friendly toward them?

STARR: Could be. I mean, I just—I don't find my job begrudging or anything like that. I mean, I do get aggravated once in a while, naturally, like everybody else would. Some stupid things happen, but I have—I don't mind what I do.

EVANS: I know going to computers was a difficult thing for you to do.

STARR: Disastrous. That was a horrible for me to do. And I had to do it because that's the way the world's gone, but I had to do it. It was a very hard learning curve for me. Very hard learning curve. I probably still use a pencil more than most people.

EVANS: And there are people who can actually read your numbers too.

STARR: If the girls can work for me, they can go to work for the United Nations when they leave. My writing is not good. I did not excel in penmanship in school.

EVANS: Did you excel at math in school?

STARR: No. I flunked Algebra and I still can't do it.

EVANS: What did you excel at in school?

STARR: Probably not much. I got by. I got by. Mrs. Duffy flunked me four years straight in Algebra.

EVANS: Ann Duffy.

STARR: Yep. And I still can't do it.

EVANS: Four years straight.

STARR: Never passed Algebra. And I went to tutoring on it and everything. I have never passed Algebra.

EVANS: Of course what you do now is more—is really all arithmetic, isn't it?

STARR: Right. If I need Algebra, I usually work it backwards. I figure it out, but it takes me a while.

EVANS: It's amazing, I mean—and yet they found this aptitude in the Army.

STARR: That's because I worked part-time with my father before I went Reserve. In high school I would—you know—sort checks and do books and things like that.

EVANS: But see—to me that’s fascinating that you would go and work with your grandfather—

STARR: Father.

EVANS: Father, father. You’d go work with your father and do that sort of thing, and yet be failing Math.

STARR: Well, I didn’t fail math—just Algebra.

EVANS: What other—well—but that’s high school math. I mean, you never got beyond that.

STARR: I had a horrible time with Algebra.

EVANS: Did you take Geometry?

STARR: Nope, never took it.

EVANS: No. All right, so you failed—you tried Algebra four times, each time failing, and yet you liked the idea of figuring out things that were real.

STARR: Yep. What I could never understand about Algebra was what that “x” was for—x equals—to me that’s not a reality.

EVANS: So you’re a very practical sort of person.

STARR: That I am. Like Edie says, “You’re a black and white person.” There’s no glass half full with me.

EVANS: All right. So everybody understands exactly where they are with you.

STARR: Yeah, I would think so.

EVANS: Pretty much. Good. Okay, well thanks a lot Bob.

[Tape ends; End of Interview]

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