In Portland

Oral Narrative of Joe Seiferman

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Wesleyan University
ENGL 274: Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarries

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Samuel Cohen and Rosa McElheny are students at Wesleyan University. They are enrolled in ENGL274: Oral Narratives and the Portland Brownstone Quarries, a class taught by Professor Indira Karamcheti in the fall of 2009. This oral history project is sponsored by the English Department and by the Center for Community Partnerships, with a goal of preserving the history of the Portland Brownstone Quarry through the personal account of individuals connected to the quarries.

This narrative is compiled from five interviews Rosa and Samuel conducted with Joe Seiferman, lifelong Portland resident and proprietor of the Riverdale Motel in Portland, CT. The interviews were conducted at the Riverdale Motel in September and October 2009. Portions of the interview were presented at the Portland Public Library on December 10, 2009, and the full transcript, audio recordings, and this narrative are archived in the Wesleyan University Special Collections, WesScholar, the Middlesex County Historical Society, and the Portland Historical Society.

The photos included were taken by Mr. Seiferman in March 1936. He consented to their use in this project.
Joe Seiferman was born in Portland, CT on October 29, 1925. He owns and manages the Riverdale Motel, located along the Connecticut River on Route 66 in Portland, CT, and he lives there today. We spoke with Joe in the Riverdale Room, a function hall on the motel grounds.

I was born right on this property, but down by the river, in the big brick house down by the river. In my young years it was a farm, mostly. The property was a farm.

My father bought the first of this place around 1914, and basically what he bought, the first of it, was strictly an area up on the hill up there. He had a motor boat at that time, an old clunker, and he used to come down the river with his girlfriends and his buddies, and they wanted a place to picnic. So he bought a little piece of land up on the hill from the old sea captain that owned the brick house; he was this old sea captain that used to come up the river, had seen the house, there, and, when he decided to retire he must have had dough, so he bought the house, and he lived there, and he bought quite a bit of land around it. So my father, he’d come down by boat, and the captain wouldn’t sell the house but he sold a piece of land up there, and then eventually, the old sea captain- I don’t know whether he died or whether my father bought it from him before he died- but I know that, the old house was built in 1800, and it burned in 1932 pretty bad, and so actually the interior of it is completely rebuilt in ’32.

The motel business didn’t start until about 1935 or so, and that was strictly overnight cabin business. This road was put through in 1927, and in, ‘30, ‘29 my father built a restaurant here. This, at that time was the main road between New York and Boston, and he got a contract with New England Transportation and Greyhound Bus. The buses going north would stop here at his restaurant, and the buses going south stopped at the Cyprus Grill on New Haven Road in Middletown. The two of them got together because neither one was big enough to have two or three buses at the same time and the buses met. This was the halfway point between New York and Boston pretty much, so it was logical that the buses would be in this area at the same time.

When I was little, my father catered to New Yorkers. Up until the Second World War, when the tourism really died down, he was earning a good portion of his income from catering to New Yorkers on vacation, and so they were my playmates because nobody lived around here. I never played baseball, or any of the sports, even when I was in high school, because it was too hard to get home after the game nights, and so I was never really connected much with the down- what we call the downtown kids. At that time, there was six or seven, eight families of us that were all farm families, and for parties, we got together, so that for my birthday, it would be some of these other farm kids around here that would be at my birthday, and I would get invited to their houses for their birthday parties and that stuff, but it was not the what we call the downtown kids, the ones that walked to school. There wasn’t anybody that I could see, but the New Yorkers were here in the summertime.

Being a farm my parents grew most all the products that they sold in the restaurant. In fact, I got so tired of coconut custard pie, because we had lots of milk, and lots of eggs on the farm. My father used to butcher his own beef and that too, so that their
pork chops and bacon and that was growing on the farm. In the Depression days, it was a way of selling his own products in the farm. And, we also did a lot of strawberries. We used to send strawberries to the Hartford market from, I guess, sometime in May, to June, and then in about the middle of June we'd start sending corn, and as a kid I used have to get up in the morning and help the guys pick corn when I was 12 or 13 years old.

Back in the '30s, when the restaurant was doing pretty good in the Depression, a lot of his neighbors were not doing as good, and so my father kept lending them money, and then trading them land for money, so he accumulated over 300 acres of land, in this area. He bought more land and built more houses, kept expanding, until what we got here today. The farm really went down considerably, though, in the Second World War, because of no help, and we’ve sold a lot of the land off. Practically all on the north side of the road here we’ve got rid of. We only got ten or fifteen acres in here now, the rest of it was sold off.

In addition to running the farm and the motel business, Joe’s father worked for the town, serving as First Selectman during Joe’s childhood, and then later as postmaster.

I was very much aware of the Depression in the ‘30s, however. I went to St. Mary’s school, the Catholic School, and I couldn’t go down to the town hall at night or after school to go home with my father. I had to go down and stay out in the backyard until a constable could come out of the town hall, and get me, bring me in, because when I would walk around there the welfare recipients would grab me and hold me for the hostage to try and get something out of my father or the selectman’s office for welfare, for food, for clothes, to get a new pair of shoes for their kid. Things were desperate in them days. I saw that and the people that I know, their kids, their parents woulda grabbed me if they got a hold of me.

So I think that it, it impressed me a lot seeing parents cryin’ over getting food or trying to get a pair of shoes for their kid. That is something that I hope nobody has to see. I remember being told by my parents and my uncles that a penny was worth a lot of money. And I knew that we were better, that I was better off than a lot of my friends that way, but I also knew that if I got paint on my jacket, I wasn’t gonna get a new jacket right away. It was bad, and, there’s no question it left an impression on me.

The Riverdale property is located three miles east of the Portland Brownstone Quarries in downtown Portland. Quarrying began in the seventeenth century, and business peaked in the second half of the nineteenth century. Stone from Portland built many of the famous brownstones in New York City and supplied development up and down the East Coast and as far away as San Francisco. Operations slowed in the early twentieth century as interest in brownstone waned, and floods in 1936 and 1938 filled the quarry holes with water, marking the end of the quarrying industry in Portland.

Most of the time that I was down in the quarries was with my father, and he would be down for some reason, either ‘bout extendin’ a water pipe or doin’ something. By the time I was old enough to go down by myself they were out of business. I was only thirteen when the quarries stopped altogether. At this age it’s awful hard to remember what sixty or seventy years ago happened, but I can visualize the steam engines today
because they were very intriguing- to see the guys shoveling coal into them and the steam coming up boo-boo-boo-boo-boo [mimicking sound of steam engine].

I remember watching the derrick pick up these big stones, and back in them days the derricks were not on turn tables that could swing around as easy. They had to pull the boom over to lay it down on the on the car. It was very fascinating- most of the power was steam power. The early water line that was put through there was to supply water for the steam engines in the quarry. There was no diesel engines makin’ noise in the quarries, all steam engines. As a kid to see a big fire and lotta steam shootin’ out was an interesting thing to look at and to see how them big drums would turn and the cables would go down and that. I don’t remember much about it, but I remember about how it worked.

I think that I saw things like that that a lot of my friends didn’t see because their father had other things to do, other than ride around town looking for where there was problems. Whereas the first selectman, my father was the guy who had to appropriate the money for the gas for the firetrucks to do the job, and had to assign people to do the other emergency work, and so forth. With his job, I got to see a lot of these things that even my brother didn’t see because I was the older boy, and so he took his older son with him. I was the one; “Joe, go get me a tape measure. Joe, go get me a flashlight. Joe, go get the camera.”

The ’36 flood was a rainstorm that went up the Connecticut River Valley. A warm rain came up in March when there was a lot of snow up in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, or Vermont and New Hampshire primarily, and the warm rain went all the way up, it melted all the snow at one time, and down it came.

It probably started to rise along about the tenth or the fifteenth of March. The river was getting up a little bit on the nineteenth; it was rising fast and I think it peaked about March twenty-first. But I remember March nineteenth because that’s my brother’s birthday, and on my brother’s birthday party in March of 1936, we realized that the flood was going to get into the cow barns, and so we moved our cows out of the barns down here up to a vacant barn at the Payne farm up the road head. But we also wanted to move some hay and those kids worked all day takin’ hay out of the barn and loadin’ it into a truck and taking it up to the Payne farm. So that was impressionable on all of us, that here’s the first time the flood had ever got into the barn.

In ’38 two years later, the hurricane went up the Connecticut River Valley and dumped a lot of water on everything, and brought the river up faster I think than the ’36 flood as far as the raising goes.

The ‘38 hurricane was strictly a rain that went up the Connecticut River, so that it really came up quick, and the snow melt went on a little more gradual although it was raisin’ pretty fast. But that hurricane really sent the water down in a hurry and so that one had a slight backup the day of the hurricane with the water being pushed into Long Island Sound. That’s why New London, and Saybrook and those towns had so much damage in the ’38 hurricane. More from water than from wind. Wind damage was not very much other than for trees in the ’38 hurricane. We lost an awful lot of trees.

The hurricane had an early start but then it peaked at about the same elevation as the ’36 flood. It’s funny because in 1938, none of us expected it to get to that same height as it did in ’36, and it was within about six inches of the same height of water, about four to six inches lower here.
Joe not only remembers the floods in 1936, but he also documented them in photographs. These pictures show his property, the quarries, Portland, and surrounding towns.

For a twelve or thirteen year old boy it was very interesting being down in the quarries with my father while they were flooding.

My father had fairly bad arthritis in his hips, so that when we were at the quarries, like the pictures of the water first coming into the quarry hole, he would just say, “Joe, go down there and get a picture of that, the water’s gonna start comin’ in,” and I climbed down, and he stood up at the bank and hollered at me, “go over there, go over there!” Back in them days, you know, it wasn’t like today, where you could take twenty five pictures in a five minutes on a digital camera. It was eight or twelve pictures on a roll of film, so you didn’t shoot a lot of pictures of any one object.

A lot of people woulda had trouble being able to get to places because the police were restrictin’ them. The National Guard was around a lot of the places, and because of my father being selectman I could go with him and take pictures. We could go and the National Guard would let us through. So that helped me get to a lot of areas to take pictures that everybody couldn’t get to. I don’t think anybody else could get down into the quarries like I did because the police would have stopped ‘em. Because of my father bein’ able to go down, then this little boy could go too.

There’s an original picture from when I climbed down in the quarry before it flooded. That’s the water first startin’ over across the road, running down the hill into the quarry. See you don’t notice the water in the quarry at that time. It’s so far down you don’t see any water, but its startin’ to come across the road, washin’ into the quarry. The river’s behind the railroad cars, and I’m down inside the quarries, see this is part of the quarry wall here. And I crawled down into the quarry, cuz my father wanted to get a picture of the water startin’ to come across the road into the quarry. About an hour after this it washed the road out, and that’s when the water really started to pour in and fill the quarries up, and that’s when it took the railroad cars and that along with it. I would say it probably took less than two hours for the quarries to fill up. We stayed there until it was level across, and that’s how come I had the picture of the cars floatin’ around in there. They were taken mostly from the same area of high ground over towards Middlesex Avenue.

I remember going over with my father in that intersection there, up on the hill where K-Mart and Expect and that are. We went up to Glastonbury and got over the river and came down there because there was farm in that triangle between Stop & Shop, and the 99 Restaurant, and the Dunkin’ Donuts, that area that’s built up now, there’s a carwash and that in there now. But there was a farm there, two story farm house there in that triangle and a barn, and, it was a cousin of my fathers that lived there, and we went over at the height of the ‘36 flood, and it was getting to the second story on that house that’s in the center there. If we had a flood today, the same depth as the ‘36 flood was, then maybe the top of Stop & Shop’s sign might show, but the car wash and the 99 Restaurant, and the Dunkin Donuts and that along there would not show. They would all be so far under water that it would be just be part of the lake.
After the ’36 flood, my father took the grates out of the big furnace down the big house, and had an oil burner installed. He was sick of shoveling coal, and his kids weren’t too good at it, so, he put an oil burner in. But he did it in the summer of ’38. And, he was smart enough to pull the oil burner out of the furnace and bring it up into the kitchen, on the kitchen floor, during the hurricane and flood. Then when he looked around and saw all the trees he had down, and everything, and see back at that time we were still doin’ farmin’ and so we still had a couple a farm employees working for him, so they started cuttin’ all that wood, he left the oil burner on the kitchen floor, and put the grates back in the old furnace, and we burned wood. And I think we were still burning wood when I went into service in ’44, because after the hurricane we had so much wood down around on the farm. It took a long time to clean up, that storm.

A lot of people lost their lives in that hurricane down by the shore. It wasn’t anything that was trivial or anything. It was a serious situation. I don’t think there’s anything they can do in places like that to protect them from another hurricane if we got the same type of storm. Long Island Sound is unique in that it has a big opening out there by Rhode Island, and a very small end down there at New York City, so the wind can blow the water into Long Island Sound, and build it up, and it can’t get out down the other end at New York, so the Sound just rises. And you’ll see that every once in a while in the weather forecast now, unusual high tides, wind blowin’. They’ll give the weather forecast, six foot above normal tides in Greenwich and some of those places along the Sound. And most of that is caused by wind blowin’ into the Sound. Another hurricane could make damage down there bad. Certainly it was a very damaging storm.

And toward the end, I’d say it was probably getting toward the end of the storm, there was a lady down by in one of our houses down by the river who went into labor. Her husband came up to get a saw or something because a tree had fallen down across the driveway down there, and he needed to cut it, the tree, to get the car out to take her to the hospital. So my mother sent this worker that worked for the farm, and me down with our farm truck to cut that tree. And when we came back up, he was with us, and she said, well, “you, you two guys go with them so if there’s any trees in the way between here and the Middlesex Hospital…” And we stopped four or five times and cut trees for them to get to the Middlesex Hospital. And we pulled wires off Main Street in Middletown—there was wires down on Main Street, and the car couldn’t get through. And we hooked a rope on them and pulled them over to the side of the road, the old farm truck, so that he got down Main Street to the Middlesex Hospital. By the time we came back, we had to stop a couple times more and cut stuff because stuff had fallen down while we were over there and, well, the old farm truck, we didn’t care about scratching it, so if it wasn’t too big, we went through ‘em.

‘38 was such a disaster from the trees down. That was the big problem, that people couldn’t get home. See back in ‘38 we still didn’t have many chainsaws. Back in 1938, there weren’t very many big machines, and the few that were, were still pretty much steam.

Everybody had to cooperate pretty well, but it was a lot a hard work. ‘38 was when the public works WPA projects and that started up, so there were a lot of man power available, to work saws and that, but I know it was a week before they got Main Street Portland so you could drive up to it. These men with two man saws sawing trees
off the stumps, and they had a steam shovel that a contractor in Middletown that was a friend of my father’s had brought over, and run for the town of Portland to picking up the stumps and so forth on Main Street. As the men cut the branches off the big trees and that, he would pick ‘em up and cast them to the side of the road so that they could get Main Street open. Eventually he picked up a lot of the stumps, and across the street there was an old town road over there, that washed out so bad, that my father decided that it was going to cost the town too much to fix it. It was the old road, a connection between this road and Middle Haddam Road, that used to come across this area, but after 1929 it was very seldom used. But it was washed out so bad that they decided they’d just fill it in, and all the stumps off of Main Street and East Main Street and Fairview Street and that were brought out here, and they were buried over there. I don’t remember how big the hole was, but I know it was full, filled in with stumps, and they worked for weeks, afterwards, bringin’, and gettin’ the trees off the roads. Yep, all of the public works people were working, cleaning up trees for a long time after that ‘38 hurricane.

After the 1936 flood, everybody just thought that that was the extreme and it would never happen again in their lifetime, so why spend your money on it to do anything about it. After the ‘38 hurricane, there was movement in some cases. There was a few things that changed, although I don’t think there was a lot that most people could do, as far as preventin’ flooding. That is to say, Hartford did start the dykes. In Middletown, their main power plant that they had by the river was taken out of there and they built a new substation that takes care of distribution of power and that, because they couldn’t take another long term outage like that.

I don’t know how much real impact it had on life in the town, but it certainly affected an awful lot of people. Round here, naturally, people didn’t rebuild the second time in some of the real flooded locations. Had it only been the ‘36 flood, I don’t think people would have rebuilt and said, “oh it will never happen again.” But havin’ the ‘38 follow so soon, there were houses that never got fixed. People just looked at it and said, “I’m not gonna try and fix that again, we just did it two years ago, and now look it? We gotta, again.” But I know houses that get flooded on minor floods, and they’re still there, they clean up every time. But the river has behaved pretty well in the last few years.

The ’36 and ’38 floods really ended the quarries, so that basically I think that had the two occurrences not happened you might have had the quarrying operation there for quite a few more years. It hadn’t completely gone out of existence. But, as far as the major quarry operation goes, I think that it was affected to a great extent by the change in construction in the ‘40s and ‘50s to where buildings were no longer gonna be built piece by piece, block by block. There wasn’t the market for the stone anymore really. They probably could have got the money if they could have a showed a big enough market for the stone, but it was probably more decorative stone than it was essential building material by that time. Concrete and steel were the building materials by the time ‘38 came around. We couldn’t have masons sittin’ there putting brick after brick. We had to getta building that was up so, put a steel beam up and put a cover over it, and they can go to work in there tomorra. Between the floods shuttin’ ‘em down and the lack of demand for the work after the wars, that’s what really put the quarries out of business.
After they were flooded swimmin’ in the quarries was a popular thing for kids. I didn’t go swimming in the quarries very much because I had to be very careful that my father didn’t find out about it. The temptation was there once in a while, especially up in the upper quarry because there was easy access to get in and out of it without being caught. On a hot day in June if we got out of school a lil’ earlier there was always the temptation to go down for a swim. But we did a lot more swimming over in Jobs Pond, which in that time we owned all the land around it. But no, it was only because of some of my friends that wanted to go to the quarries that I would get caught down there. But I didn’t get caught very often— it wasn’t worth it.

See, it’s only a few years that I was around much because in ’44 I left in the service, and they didn’t flood until ’38 so it was only about six years that it was flooded that I was around down after before I went in the service and after that the quarries were of no interest to me because I had to earn a livin’ and there was no work in the quarries.

Joe has remained connected to the quarries throughout his life, including time spent working in construction and later as Director of Public Works from 1952 until 1988.

Then in 1949, the reservoir was lowered too much accidentally. They opened a drain to clear out the bottom and forgot about it, and the water got down too low. It was a very dry summer, so they didn’t have enough water coming into the town. People were getting up in the mornin’— your toilet don’t flush! And so the selectman at the time came to my father and said that he thought he could get permission from the state health department to pump out of the small quarry hole, but he didn’t know where he could get a pump that was big enough. We had a big irrigation pump here, so my father said, “Well, use my pump,” so we took the pump down the quarry, an’ hooked up the pump out of the small quarry hole. The water was good enough to pump into the mains. We chlorinated it before we put it in, and that was a unique situation tryin’ to put chlorine into a high pressure line and get any amount of control of how much you’re puttin’ in, but it did work. And so we pumped for forty five days, twenty four hours a day, and either I was there or my brother was there, all around the clock, for forty five days. By the end of the forty five days we had had a couple rainstorms and they was gettin’ water in the reservoir and we could shut down the pumps.

I guess if you’re really diggin’ around Portland today, you’ll still find a lot of brownstone. Its not good brownstone, its stuff that the quarries threw away because the grain in it wasn’t right or it was cracked.

That’s how that thing that had a dinosaur footprint in it ended up. It was dumped in a fill area, and we found it because we were puttin’ the sewer through there, and this stupid big piece of stone was in our way and we dug it up and somebody said “Look at that! It’s gotta print on it!” “Do the holes wash off?” “Is it a dinosaur print?” “I don’t know. Let’s take it over to Wesleyan, see if they know.” So, that’s how it ended up at Wesleyan. But, oh, I dug up a lotta pieces of brownstone but they didn’t have anything interesting on them.
Like many members of his generation, Joe served in World War II. As a navigator in the Marine Corps, he was stationed in the Philippines preparing for the invasion of Japan when the Japanese surrendered in 1945.

I was drafted out of high school, I never finished high school. See, in 1943, I think it was the end of ’43, they changed the draft age. I don’t remember just how it changed, but they first dropped it from twenty-one down to eighteen, then they raised the draft age up to thirty-seven or thirty-eight- somethin’ like that. So when I went in it was eighteen year old kids and thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven year old men that were goin’ through trainin’ together. Nobody in their twenties, they were already in there.

So they graduated me in the class of ’44. Old Hiram Gill was the math teacher, and when I was about a sophomore he said to me, “You should take trig and calculus because you like that stuff, and it’ll help you.” “I don’t want any more math from you,” I said, but I took ’em. It was a good thing because when I got into the Marine Corps, and did those classification tests, I knew what the hypotenuse of a triangle was, and it helped get the classification. And the Marine Corps sent me to navigation school, and I became an aerial navigator, so I didn’t have to walk during the war. I flew.

Once I got to come home, I got out pretty fast because I was overdue for discharge as far as points go and that, and I came up to Washington and got myself out of the thing.

When I came back from the war, I think my brother was convinced I was gonna marry a girl down in Atlanta. I had traveled enough in the service, but I don’t think I ever really found any place that I really wanted to be permanently. And of course, there was a financial situation to try an’ support myself without getting’ the little subsidy of havin’ a free bed.

When I came home, my brother was still running the farm but had cut down a lot, because he couldn’t keep it going during the war. So basically, I worked around the farm here that summer when I got home, put the seed in for the corn and that stuff.

And then, after the war, there was no work. Well, you’ve probably never heard of the “Fifty-two Twenty Club”, but when there was six or eight million of us got discharged in 1946 from the service, there was no way to find jobs because the main manufacturers-- General Electric, General Motors and them-- had been building war materials, so they all shut down in ’46 to retool the factories and go back to building refrigerators and cars and that. So there was very little employment. But the government had this thing, for veterans, that you could collect twenty dollars a week, to live on, for fifty-two weeks to find a job. So at that point, August, my father deeded me a little piece of land over here, and I built what is this brick building over here that’s three efficiency units as a house for myself, for something to do for the winter, so that was my first start with owning property.

And originally, I had that house rented because before I was married I couldn’t afford to live in a house by myself- didn’t want to live in a house by myself. It was better to live with my mother and have her cook for me.

And then when I decided to get married, a friend of mine was livin’ in my house over here, so I convinced my girlfriend to move into one of my father’s houses down by
the river. Actually it’s the house that the manager lives in today, down there, and so we moved down there, and we stayed there until we moved up here into this house.

In 1952 I think it was, my first son had been born and my wife wanted to go back to work, and my father talked her into taking over the motel business, which at that time was all overnight cabins. In the first year she had twelve wooden overnight cabins and she did very good in the summer but there was nothing to do in the winter, so she complained all winter. By spring we decided to build her five units down there, which is part of that brick building that’s still there, so that next winter she would have five units she could rent during the wintertime. And that worked for probably two years until it wasn’t enough to keep her busy, so we added on four more units, so she had nine units. And that lasted for a couple years, and she and her brother-in-law sat down and designed this building; he was a draftsmen.

In addition to growth at the Riverdale property, Joe witnessed changes in industry and development in Portland over the course of his life.

I never thought much about where the changes came from, but thinking back now it was probably the war that made the biggest change in the town. Yeah, the war, I think, had a bigger effect on Portland than anything else as far as industry goes.

Because of the big expansion of Pratt and Whitney and Hamilton Standard during the war, many of the people that were farming, had quit farming and gone to work in the factories and found out that it was much easier to work than taking care of cows and horses. Manufacturing of the engines took over, and the farming had to get more automated. Basically the farms that survived got bigger, and got better milking machines, and fed the cows automatically instead of dishing it out.

And, of course a lot of our population came down from up in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont. They all came out the woods to work in the factories. Portland probably only had three or four thousand people in it in the ‘30s, and by the end of the war it was probably eight thousand.

Gradually, the push for expanding houses in the ‘50s also helped to put a lot of the farms out of business because taxes got so high on land that you couldn’t afford to farm it, and developers came along and bought big chunks and made housing projects out of them, and that pretty much ended the big farming.

See, after about ’48 or ’49 there was quite a big boom in public work construction and house construction and development and so forth, so the construction industry was a real calling card, and I was relatively lucky to have worked on the farm so much and drove tractors and that. The first job I got I didn’t apply for, one of my friends asked me to come and drive trucks for them, and because I had drove trailers so much, I had no trouble getting the truck drivers’ license and, and I was good to go. So, bein’ around with the trucks, I was talking to the bulldozer operators, the backhoe operators, and when I’d be with them, I would practice with their machine a little bit.

And I think the best gift I had was vision. My depth perception was very good. I could tell whether somethin’s level or not, and my eyes were very good as far as being able to carry a grade. So in the construction industry that gives a big advantage. And I used to get pretty good tips for doin’ some of them jobs for people. And that’s how I got into public works. I was runnin’ the backhoe, and I could dig.
When I got to be working age, I realized that so many of the older people that were on the job with me would be ex-quarry workers who had to find work. If we were tryin’ to break a stone or tryin’ to move something, would say “Hey! This is the way you do that.” They knew so many of the methods that the quarry used to handle stone, both cuttin’ it and movin’ it, that if you were workin’ on somethin’ and needed to move it and it didn’t move very easy, one of these ex-quarry workers would say “Hey you gotta put a little wedge under that, you gotta do this.” You got to realize that these fellas were not in their natural thing, but they had good methods of doin’ things from the quarries.

See I went to work for the town in ’52 -- ’52 to ’88 I worked. And I was part-time before that. I think that probably half the water pipes that are in the ground in Portland and two thirds of the sewers, I installed, in my thirty-seven years, because for one thing, there was so much expansion of the town – there was so many new streets and that, in that period of time. You take from 1950 to 1980, that was a big area of subdivisions and expansion of homes and that in Portland. So there was reason to put in a lot of new sewers, a lot of new waterlines and that. But from ’52 to ’88, any water line or any sewer line. Any street light, any traffic light went through me. And it made it an interesting job.

There’s a little bridge in Portland that I built. We had a truck go through a bridge, and I said “Gee, if we send that up to the state to get them to design a repair for this bridge, its gonna be two or three weeks or a month that we’re gonna have to keep the road blocked off before we’re ever gonna get a design back from the highway department. Let’s build it ourselves.” So I formed up two side walls and put some rods in it and sent my highway foreman over and got a truckload of reinforcer rods and steel, and we put a form in there, a lot of plywood to hold it, and tied all the rods together, and the bridge is still there today.

Basically, I enjoyed public works because I had a lot of freedom. The selectmen at the time, when I worked there, were very easy-going with me, and I had a girl that worked for us at that time that was a very good grant writer, and she got me a lot of grants for putting sewers in and water lines, over the years. But then one of the selectmen decided that she was not needed, which was a big mistake, and that ended the grants for quite a while.

Had I gone to college I probably would’ve been in a different career, because I would’ve got interested in something else. There was no question I wanted my kids to go to college because I realized how many things I didn’t know. But I also found that if you can listen good, you can learn an awful lot by questioning engineers, architects. An engineer will sit down and spend a lot of time with you showing you, and provin’ why they were right. I got an awful lot of education by telling engineers that I didn’t think he was right. And, I think I was fortunate in that I was exposed to people who were willin’ to teach me a lot. But there’s no question that I don’t know what I would’ve done had I gone to college because I have no idea what interests I would’ve got. That was one of the things about education, you can never get too much of it.

I was Public Works Director for thirty-seven years, watching the town grow. And actually I saw a big change in the size of the town in the thirty-seven years that I worked for them. There aren’t too many people that keep the same job for thirty-seven years. But I was interested enough in it.
Now retired from public works, Joe continues to live in Portland and remains involved with the community. His history is inexorably connected to life in Portland, and his memories allow us access into the history of the town.

Well, I think that things like the Portland Historical Society collecting and preserving some of this – especially, if you can do it with pictures so that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren can see what the quarry looked like, or as I enjoyed the farm exhibit there – is important.

I joined the historical society only to help support it. I felt it was a worthwhile thing, to pay your dues and join it. As the historical society goes, I like their system, I like the way they do it, and I’ll contribute to it.

I feel that some of us have to get involved in order to keep the general interest in those things. If I can talk to you, or answer questions of what I think, then I should because I should let you know how I feel so that you can see where things came from.

I’ve lived in three houses. The brick house down there by the river, Beth’s house that she lives in down there by the river, the buildin’ out, over here that I built, and now in – upstairs here. Four houses. Four places actually, in my total life, other than when travelin’, and I’ve done quite a bit of travelin’. But I never found a place that I found was better for me than Portland. Yes, Portland and I get along pretty good together.
My father would take me places, and I had his camera so I snapped my fingers a lot of the time. You figure, in ‘36 I was only eleven years old, so I wasn’t too conscious of who owned a lot of things, and that. A lot of times it would be my father’s say “Joe, go down there and take a picture of that!” and so I would go.

I took most of these photos. Yeah, I was a little camera crazy kid.
That’s the same brick house, and, the water’s up halfway on the windows downstairs. It came a couple feet higher before the crest of the flood, but that was up at a point when probably my father, uh, figured that it was the top of the floods, so “go get a picture”, but it got higher than that.

Yeah, that’s Riverdale, that’s the brick house, in the picture, and you can see the old barns there. And this one got damaged enough before the next flood so that it wasn’t there in the next flood. That is my father’s boat, and see, the river is out there, the boat was just up there so that it’d be out of the current in the river.
Very few of the buildings that got flooded were damaged very much because the river flooded so big an area that it wasn’t a high current, except down if you went out in that area out there, then it was movin’ fast. But in the flood areas, the water wasn’t movin’ very fast, so it didn’t have pressure to damage. By the barns in that picture, the barns stayed raised up and they turned a little bit, but they didn’t fall apart, or, to any great extent, although when it came back down they weren’t on their foundations so at that point in time, they tilted, and needed a lot of work done on them.

Durin’ that highest part of the ‘36 flood a Coast Guard boat came in to the barnyard down there, and run right up to the three-car garage that my father had, and the guy reached down off the front of the boat and put a brass nail in the beam on the side of the garage door to mark the high point of the flood in that area.

This is toward the height of the flood here, this is that three-car garage that’s still down there. And that’s part of the- through the oars for the rowboat that we’re usin’ to get around it.
That’s another of the cottages down on the farm here, down by the river. But that one was high; it used to have a garage under it – that little spot under the porch that is sticking out. That was close to the height of the flood. I had to crawl along the hillside to get that picture.

Oh yes, that’s the farm down here, that’s the same one that I showed you, it had the garage under it, and then this is the one down here that you see the water’s right up in it. And, then, down that same area, with the debris that was floatin’ around…
Well, that could be one of the hired hands, but I would expect it might be my brother or me. We would float, rowin’ around there a lot, in the flood area. And that was before the height of the water because, uh, the barn is still in stable condition at that point in time. The doors are closed on the barn again, so that we’d taken the hay out as much as we could get of it. And that’s the farm barn, which is not there any longer because we tore it down. It was damaged in ‘36 and ‘38 both, and we fixed it after the ‘36, but after ‘38, he decided to build a new barn for the cows and not spend too much more than that, so eventually they got torn down completely.

That is the same barn and that has to be the ‘36 flood because this building went before the flood was over.
That little shack there went down the river before the flood was over. That belonged to the Coast Guard. And they stored kerosene in it back before they had batteries and electric lights in the lighthouses. My father had the contract to fill the lanterns on two of the lighthouses around here. Bobkin Right Light is up across from the new power plant, and Paper Rock is down here, just below where the power lines cross this road up here.

They Coast Guard used to bring the glasses for the lights, because they had broke every once in a while, and kerosene for the lanterns. And he used to go once every- I guess he was supposed to go every day, but I think he only went once every second or third day, and filled the kerosene and cleaned the globes on the, on the lanterns so that they were lit.
That’s in the ‘36 flood, and that’s when it’s goin’ down because you see the dark on, just the top of the windows on down the stairs. That was the height of the water, the bricks soaked up the water, so that when the flood went down, there was a red line, straight line on the building, as to where the height of the flood was.

I think that’s downtown Portland, but I’m not too sure, lower Main St. in Portland, but I’m not too sure which. It’s people, and houses flooded down. That would be something to look at, but I’m not too sure now. That’s a problem that we all have taking pictures and not labeling them.
Somebody was walkin’ down lookin’ for what was goin’ on there. Probably some homeowners that were wonderin’ if their house was gonna be around much longer.

That’s a Coast Guard cutter that was protectin’ the bridge. It was stationed there by the railroad bridge so that if any oil tanks got loose and floated down the river, they were there to blow ‘em up. That was their job, to stay there and watch out for any big tanks that would come, and that would take the bridges down, ‘cuz they didn’t want to lose the railroad bridge. In ‘36 the highway bridge was definitely under water, but it was also that they didn’t want it to fall down, so that Coast Guard cutter stayed there at the height of the flood, with its big gun on the front of it to blow up any tanks that came down. I leaned out off the bridge in order to get the picture the Coast Guard cutter.
And that was the Rivington Ram factory. My aunt worked there, that was one of the reasons that we had to get a picture of where she worked. It was put out as a postcard. I’m not too sure whether it was my photo or not. I know I took pictures of it at the time, but I’m not too sure whether that picture was one of the ones that they used to make the postcard. See, my father and mother made postcards up and sold them in the restaurant, but I’m not too sure whether it was our photos that they had made up or whether it was just a novelty picture to show the factory in the water.

I’m not too sure where those three houses are. ‘Cause I don’t recognize that fence.
I think that’s a maintenance building that the state had down under the bridge to Middletown. Pretty sure that was that big garage that was down there.

That’s lookin’ out across the meadows up there, looking toward Middletown. That was taken from up probably in the hills there. I’m not too sure where it would be, the hill’s across the river there. We’re quite a ways off because it’s too many years ago that those pictures were taken for me to remember where I took them from, I’m lucky if I recognize ‘em.
When I was taking pictures of the floods, most of it would be in Portland, and some in Cromwell. There’s a few pictures that I took from Middletown looking back across the river. I remember taking a few pictures from there. This I think was taken from over in Middletown lookin’ back toward Portland – the oil tanks and that, with the bridge in the picture, ya see.

So that could be taken from over in Cromwell, but I’m not too sure, you see, because up where K-Mart is, is where we had to be. Up on that hill, in order to take the pictures of the flood down in there.
And there’s an original picture that I climbed down in the quarry before it flooded. That’s the water first startin’ over across the road, running down the hill into the quarry. The river’s behind the railroad cars, and I’m down inside the quarries, see this is part of the quarry wall here. And I crawled down into the quarry, ‘cuz my father wanted to get a picture of the water startin’ to come across the road into the quarry. About an hour after this or less than an hour I guess it was, it washed the road out, and that’s when the water really started to pour in and fill the quarries up. That’s when it took the railroad cars and that along with it.

This is after the quarry flooded, some of the railroad cars where the train broke off that weren’t hooked to the other, and this was taken from down in the quarry lookin’ at the debris floatin’ around.
I think that that is down near where the quarry hole was. The water’s starting to go down by the
time that was taken.

That was down by the old quarry buildings that were damaged. I think that was after the flood
had gone down, and but I’m not too sure. I’m surprised that it looks as though there’s snow on
the roof there, I didn’t know there was any snow left after the ‘36 flood went down, but I think it
is.

I think that that is down near where the quarry hole was. The water’s starting to go down by the
time that was taken.
Rosa: So this is… its October 4th 2009. This is Sam Cohen and Rosa McElheny of Wesleyan University speaking to Joe Seiferman of Portland, CT and it’s about 12:12 in the afternoon.

Sam: All right, so Mr. Seiferman, today we thought we’d focus more to have you talk a little about your family history and your childhood and possibly how that, how that relates to the quarries and your memories, but more trying to figure out some of your background and where you’re coming from

Joe: Well, I think that, uh, I was born right on this property, but down by the River, in the big brick house down by the river.

Sam: By the river near the dock

Joe: Yeah, yeah, and, uh, so that in my young years it was a farm, mostly.

Sam: This property—

Joe: The property was a farm. The motel business didn’t start until about 1935 or so, is the first—and that was strictly overnight cabin business, but, uh, and even then, uh, during the Depression, 1932 through the early 30s, my father had built— when this road was put through in 1927, uh, through here, ‘30, ‘29, he built a restaurant here, and uh, this, at that time was the main road between New York and Boston, and he got a contract with New England Transportation and Greyhound Bus. The buses going north would stop here at his restaurant, and the buses going south stopped at the Cyprus, in, on New Haven Road in Middletown. You know where the Cyprus Grill is?

Sam: Mm-hmm

Joe: Yeah, well they used to, the two of them got together. This one took the northbound buses and Cyprus took the southbound buses because neither one was big enough to have two or three buses at the same time and the buses met, this was the halfway point between New York and Boston pretty much, so it was logical that the buses would be in this area at the same time. So that’s why, but, and being a farm they grew most all the products that they sold in the restaurant. In fact, I got so tired of coconut custard pie, because we had lots of milk, and lots of eggs on the farm, and—

Sam: You didn’t grow coconuts, though, did you?

Joe: No, but the coconuts was the only thing that had— we had to buy a little sugar too, we didn’t grow any sugar. But, uh, they sold, and he used to have his own, butcher his own beef and that too, so that their pork chops and bacon and that was growing on the farm, so in the depression days, it was a way of selling his own products in the farm. And, we also did a lot of strawberries. We used to send strawberries to the Hartford market from, I guess, sometime in
May, to June, and then in about the middle of June we’d start sending corn, and as a kid I used have to get up in the morning and help the guys pick corn when I was 12 or 13 years old, and, uh, by that way, and as a— my father bought more land and bought more— built more houses— expanded— kept expanding, until what we got here today, although we’ve sold a lot of the land off, because, uh, everything practically all on the north side of the road here we’ve got rid of. We only got ten or fifteen acres in here now, the rest of it was sold off.

Sam: So, as the motel expanded did the farm shrink, cuz it was farmland—

Joe: Yeah, the farm, really, uh, the farm went down considerably in the Second World War, because of no help.

Sam: Who was working on the farm?

Joe: My brother was the main one that was, he was an exception from the draft, for the, and, [5:00] uh, I was drafted out of high school, I never finished high school. And uh, although they graduated me in the class of ’44, but, not very happy to the English teacher and that [laughs] although I got to admit that, uh old Hiram Gill was the math teacher, and when I was about a sophomore he said to me “You should take trig and calculus because you like that stuff, and it’ll help you.” “I don’t want to more math from you,” but I took ‘em. It was a good thing because when I got, I was drafted into the Marine Corps, and did those classification tests, I knew what the hypotenuse of a triangle was [laughs] and a few other things like that, uh, helped get the classification, and the Marine Corps sent me to navigation school, and I became an aerial navigator, so I didn’t have to walk during the war. I flew, but that was one of the things about education, you can never get too much of it, but uh, so that and then, after the war, there was no work. Well we got, you’ve probably never hear of the “Fifty-two Twenty Club”, but when there was six or eight million of us got discharged in 1946 from the service, there was no way to find jobs because the main manufacturers, General Electric, General Motors and them, had been building war mach—materials so they all shut down in ’46 to retool the factories and that to go back to building refrigerators and cars and that, instead of, so, there was very little employment, but the government had this thing, for veterans, that you could collect twenty dollars a week, to live on, for Fifty-two weeks to find a job, and so that, at that point, uh, when I came home, my brother was still running the farm but had cut down a lot, because he couldn’t keep it going during the war... So, I got out, August, my father deeded me a little piece of land over here, and, I built what is this brick building over here not that’s three efficiency units, as a house for myself, for something to do for the winter, so that was my first start with owning property [laughs].

Rosa: So your father was the one who lived here originally?

Joe: He, he started, he, he did the farm, and that; he did the restaurant, and in 1952 I think it was, my first son had been born and my wife wanted to go back to work, and he talked her into taking over the motel business, which at that time was all overnight cabins. It was no brick buildings or anything, all these buildings. But, and, in the first year she had twelve wooden overnight cabins and she did very good in the summer but there was nothing to do in the winter, so, she complained all winter, and so, by spring we decided to build her five units, down there, which is
part of that brick building that’s still there, so that next winter she would have five units she could rent during the wintertime. And that worked for probably two years and it wasn’t enough to keep her busy, so we added on four more units, so she had nine units. And that lasted for a couple years, and she and her brother-in-law sat down and designed this building; he was a draftsmen, and, and when they designed this building, uh, he couldn’t get a building permit, for it because he wasn’t a licensed engineer, but I could get his plans signed by the town engineer, because by that time was I was working for the town of Portland, in the waterworks and sewer at that time. That’s about the time I took over highways too [10:00] is about ‘72 or ’73, because, uh, but then I was Public Works Director for thirty seven years, and, uh watching the, town grow. Big portion of the water lines and sewer lines in the town today I put in or I was under contract with, [incomprehensible] that installed them, and uh so that, that was a big area of when public sewers were being expanded everyplace, and we built the first sewage treatment plants to treat the stuff, up until about 1950, most of the sewage from Middletown, Portland, and Hartford all flowed into the Connecticut River, the way it came out of the toilets.

Sam: Up until 1950?

Joe: About 1950, it may have been, some of the plants were probably built in the 40s, but, uh, not too many. And then, uh, the old primary plants were built, and they separated the solids out, and then it went into… It was late ‘60s early ‘70s before most of the secondary plants were built to treat the liquids, uh, but that, uh, is a little…

I was involved in that to a great extent, because of being the new thing on the street. And, the state didn’t know what to do with some of the permits and licenses and so forth, but, we got things operating pretty well, and today most of the plants are working very well. But we’ve had a lot of experience, in the last fifty years.

Sam: Yeah.

Joe: So that’s where, this, uh. I retired in ’88 when we built that building out in back, there. The town, because I had thirty seven years in, and I didn’t want that, getting up every night when there was a water leak or a snowstorm. So, uh, and that’s why, since then I’ve just stayed around here pretty much.

Sam: So how long was this, was the property in your family before you were born, did your father buy it?

Joe: Yeah, my father bought, uh— my father had— my father’s family had a farm on Lincoln Street in Middletown, you know where Lincoln Street is?

Sam: Yeah! When did they come to Middletown?

Joe: Huh?

Sam: When did your father’s family move to Middletown?

Joe: I don’t know.
Sam: Do you know when your ancestors moved to America?

Joe: No, not really, because but I know that they had land out in Middlefield, that, when I was a little boy, used to go out and cut hay in Middlefield, and, uh, but 106 Lincoln Street there was a barn, and their pasture, they used to drive the cows down High Street, and the pasture was down there near where the landfill is down there now, where Butler had the construction buildings and that down there.

Rosa: So these are your father’s parents?

Joe: Yeah

Rosa: Yeah, ok

Joe: Yeah that was my father’s father originally started Lincoln Street I think, because, but as… that I never remember, there was never any cows on Lincoln Street in my day, that by the time I was born. He bought the first of this place around 1914, and basically what he bought, the first of it, was strictly an area up on the hill up there. He had a motor boat at that time, an old clunker, and he used to come down the river with his girlfriends and that, and his buddies, and they wanted a place to picnic, and he bought a little piece of land up on the hill from the old sea captain that owned the brick house, and that, and he was this old sea captain that used to come up the river, had seen the house, there, and, when he decided to retire [15:00] he must have had dough so he bought the house, and he lived there, and he bought quite a bit of land around it. And, uh, so my father, went, he’d come down by boat and bought the house then, and he wouldn’t sell the house but he sold a piece of land up there, and then eventually, the old sea captain—I don’t know whether he died or whether my father bought it from him before he died, but I know that, uh, the old house was built in 1800, and uh, it burned in 1932 pretty bad, and so actually the interior of it is completely rebuilt in ’32. In fact the roof is raised up because it had dormer windows in it up until ’32 when he raised the roof so the windows upstairs were your regular normal windows again, instead of, but, so that’s, uh, and back in the ‘30s, when the farm, the restaurant was doing pretty good in the depression, a lot of his neighbors were not doing as good, and so, he kept lending them money, and then trading them land for money, so he accumulated over 300 acres of land, in this area, which we couldn’t afford to keep today for taxes [laughs].

Sam: What did the neighbors do? Was it mostly farmland around here?

Joe: Yeah, it was all farmland, practically. See some of them weren’t too successful, and, there were, although a couple people had tried to built houses, and have lots and that, and with that ’32, ’33, ’34 recession, they needed money, and he had it from the restaurant business and that, and he kept buying land.

Sam: So would you say that that was a turning pointing Portland history from an, when most, before 1930, before the depression did a lot of people, a lot of worked on farms.
Joe: Yeah, a lot of, a lot of.

Sam: During the depression did people start moving off farms?

Joe: Yes, Portland had, in fact, uh, the 27th of October, I think it is, the Historical Society is going to have a meeting in the Grange Hall in Portland, and, a bunch of us descendents of the farmers are going to be up there to talk to the Historical Society about the farms in Portland. So, if you’re not doing anything that night, its free. You can always—

Sam: Is it at the Historical Society?

Joe: Hm?

Sam: Is it, where is, where is the meeting?

Joe: It’s at the Grange Hall, uh, which if you go out Route 17, you know where the fairgrounds is—

Sam: Yeah

Joe: But when you come to that 17, 17a intersection, if you go straight across there, the Grange Hall is on your right, just where the road forks, you go straight up the hill and it forks off to the right, and the Grange Hall is right across from that fork. And I know it’s a public, all the Historical Society meetings are open to the public, free of charge, so that, uh, if you want to learn more about the farms in Portland, that might be a good place to go, because, uh, I know a couple of the guys very well that are going to be there, but I don’t know for sure who they’ve contacted to be there. But I know, they called me up and wanted me to be up there. So, uh, I don’t really like talking to people [laughs]. Well, you know…

My job with public works was a “No” job. Had to, say you “No”, tell you “No” because everybody wants government to do things for them, that are a little bit more than what the neighbor’s getting, and so when you try and run a public works department, “you want a street light?” “you want a fire hydrant?” “you want a curb in front of you house?” and you can’t do all those things [20:00] so, and, my kid taught me that I built a, a negative attitude to people, that I said no so much, that I didn’t know how to say yes. But its true, you do, things like that do drag over.

Sam: So do you remember if there were new industries that became popular or important at the end of, kind of the end of the depression, because you had in 1936 and 1938 you have the floods which—

Joe: Well, there was a fertilizer plant in Portland, down the river, uh, was Hubbard Hall, what was it before that? There was another name on it… Hubbard Hall was the [incomprehensible] name, but uh, I can’t remember the other name now, uh. They were a big manufacturer of fertilizer. They, uh, were fairly successful because they bought fish bones and stuff like that in Boston Harbor and Gloucester and those places, and could bring it up the river and unload it and they ground it up there, and mixed it with other imported stuff that they could get by boat, and
mixed to make fertilizer out of ‘em, and uh, that was, uh, that was big back in the 30s when I was a kid.

And, uh, Standard Nap came in to Portland, uh, in the early ‘30s. They were a machine manufacturing company from New York, and, uh, they lasted until a few years ago, they had a strike, and it went out of business. But, uh, it was for quite a few years a major manufacturer, and, and, uh, the ‘40s or the ‘50s that Robert Gare built a paper box factory in Portland, that’s still down there. Stone Corrugated now, but it changed names, but Gare was the original builder of that plant. And they made corrugated boxes, and uh, never, the first time I saw them making corrugated cardboard I couldn’t believe that they could make that stuff fold up like that [laughs], or spray glue and make it stick. But they sure did it.

Sam: So people who had to sell their— farmers who had to sell their land and, and quarry workers, they weren’t out of work? Did they start working in these industries?

Joe: No, I think, some of them did. But, uh see, the tobacco took over pretty big, the shade grown tobacco took a lot of the farmland over.

Rosa: When did that happen?

Joe: Well, I think probably before the Second World War. But, uh, because the shade grown tobacco was cigar wrapper tobacco. They can make a cigar out of cheap tobacco, but they need something nice and smooth to wrap around it. This is what was grown in these shade grown tobacco areas. And Portland was one of the big areas, and East Windsor, up where Bradley Field is today, was all tobacco farms up there. That area was also a big tobacco area. I guess there’s still some tobacco up there now, but not much. But uh, gradually, the push for expanding houses in the ‘50s put a lot of the farms out of business because taxes got so high on land that you couldn’t afford to farm it, and, so, developers came along and bought big chunks and made housing projects out of them, and that pretty much ended the big farming in… [25:00]

Sam: As the farming was ending and as the quarry operations were ending, there weren’t problems with unemployment, then, because of these new industries…

Joe: Well, you see, by that time, uh, because of the big expansion of Pratt and Whitney and Hamilton Standard and them during the war, those comp—so many of the people that were farming and that had quit farming and gone to work during the war for Pratt and Whitney and them, that they had stopped farming.

Rosa: Okay, and that’s kind of what happened on the—

Joe: Yeah, the war, I think, had a bigger effect on it than anything else as far as… and, of course a lot of our population came down from up in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont… because… they all came out the woods to work in the factories because, uh… Portland probably only had three or four thousand people in it in the ‘30s, and by the end of the war it was probably eight thousand.

Rosa: Wow
Joe: Because of all these people moving in to work… in… see some of them worked in New
Britain, and they had a lot of gear and [incomprehensible] companies over there in New Britain,
so that I believe I believe that was really the end of any farming to a great extent that most of the
help went to work in the factories during the war and found out that it was much easier to work
than taking care of cows and horses.

Rosa: Do you remember your parents talking about that sort of a shift, or did they react to it in
any way?

Joe: No, I don’t really know. Uh, I never thought much about it until you asked me about where
the changes came from and uh thinking back now that it was probably the war that made the
biggest change in that manufacturing of the engines and that took over from the farming and uh,
had to get more automated so that basically the farms that survived got bigger, and got better
milking machines, and fed the cows automatically instead of dishing it out, so…

Sam: So would also say that the war was pretty important in helping Portland after the downfall
of the quarrying industry, because that was a big part of the industry in Portland and when that
stopped…

Joe: Yeah, I don’t…I think, uh… the war probably didn’t have much effect on the quarries
because they were out of business before the war started, so…

Sam: But not that long. Well when when would you say the quarries, in your exp— in your
memory when did the quarries start becoming less significant?

Joe: Well, there was… in the ’36 and ’38 floods that really ended the quarries, so that basically I
think that had the two occurrences not happened you might have had the quarrying operation
there for quite a few more years, and, but because brownstone was a product that people liked,
but… and I guess that people still like it because I see you can get brownstone from up north
somewhere too today…uh, so that it hadn’t completely gone out of existence, but as far as the
major quarry operation goes… and I think that to a great extent, the change in construction in the
‘40s and ‘50s that we learned uh to where building were no longer gonna be built piece by piece,
block by block, [30:00] and you don’t see very many… if the brick building today is just a brick
shell, the building is really a steel frame inside there, but, so many of ‘em today are covered with
either aluminum or plastic or somethin’ so that there aren’t any, uh, demand for that type of
construction, and that’s what really put… that between the floods shuttin’ ‘em down and the lack
of demand by the work after the wars, and I think that there again the war brought abouts a lot of
this construction because we needed to build the factory quick. We couldn’t have masons sittin’
there putting brick after brick. We had to getta building that was up so, steel— put a steel beam
up and put a cover over it, and they can go to work in there tomarra.

Rosa: What do you do you remember about the quarries about the floods?

Joe: Not very much because the quarries uh, I remember watching the derrick pick up these big
stones, and back in them days they derricks were not on turn tables that could swing around as
easy. They had to pull the boom over to lay it down on the the on the car that... Uh, it was very fascinating to there again most of the power was steam power. The early water line that was put through there was to supply water for the steam engines in the quarry. There was no diesel engines uh that makin’ noise in the quarries... all steam engines... and as a kid to see a big fire and lotta steam shootin’ out was an interesting thing to look at and to see how them big drums would turn and the cables would go down and that, but I don’t remember much about it but I remember about how it worked.

Sam: So would you would you just go down on a weekend maybe to watch it? With your dad?

Joe: No... well, actually most of the time that I was down there was with my father and he would be down for some reason, either ‘bout extendin’ a water pipe or doin’ something and uh, so that uh and see by the time I was old enough to go down by myself they were out of business. I was only thirteen when the quarries stopped altogether, so. And at this age it’s awful hard to remember what sixty or seventy years ago happened. uh, because, but I can I can visualize the steam engines today because they were very intriguing to see the guys shoveling coal into them and the steam coming up boo-boo-boo-boo [mimicking sound of steam engine] so...

Rosa: Do you remember watching ships on the— on the river?

Joe: Oh yes, in fact the- there was two steamboats on the river when I was little: the Middletown and the Hartford, and they ran from Hartford to New York everyday. One of them left Hartford uh late in the afternoon I think because I know we used to swim out to it and try and catch coins from the people and uh they uh and the boat used to blow its horn something fierce because they didn’t like these kids swimming in the river out there, but uh, and if my father caught me I know I had been in the bad boy. But uh now one boat left Hartford every night and one left New York every night and so they passed in Long Island Sound and so you could go to get a boat in Hartford or you could get it in Middletown, [35:00] but uh there was a dock a better dock than there is today in Middletown. And they used to pull in and they stopped a couple places I don’t know exactly where because I was too young to know what the boat was doing but I know that they took passengers and you could get on the boat in late afternoon in Hartford and go to bed and wake up in the mornin’ and go to work in New York and you could get the boat late in the afternoon in New York and get off in the mornin’ in Hartford and the boat would stay there all day and left again in the afternoon. The two boats were goin’ back and forth all the time. And they were really uh attractive to us because they made big waves and there weren’t very many boats that made big waves in them days the choo tugs that came up they were all pushin’ big coal barges primarily, the ol’ coal barges. See there was uh, just a boat where the harbor park restaurant is there was this big coal yard there and the coal barge companies unloaded the barges and all the coal companies would fill their trucks up

Rosa: So, bringing coal from other places to Middletown?

Joe: [Incomprehensible] Pennsylvania. I don’t really know where they came from because there were coal barges, but when I was small the biggest traffic on the river was coal.

Sam: Do you remember any brownstone being shipped away?
Joe: No, I don’t remember any brownstone being shipped by boat.

Sam: How was— do you remember how it was shipped?

Joe: Uh

Sam: Was it shipped at all or was it—

Joe: Well yes it was shipped but, the boats that were takin’ it didn’t make anything that I would know about really payin’ attention to. the, course the early boats before my time were all sailin’ boats but uh I know that they did ship to New York and them places afterwards on flat boats but uh it wasn’t enough of them that… and I can remember there probably before the war, in ’40, it started the oil barges started to become more popular and less of the coal barges but uh, there’s still once in a while a coal barge goes up to Harford now to the garbage up there they still augment their firewood coal sometimes.

Rosa: Oh wow, huh.

Joe: Mm-hmm. And they still have a coal barge come up once in a while. But not very many any more… yeah… The river has always been an attraction to me, but…

Sam: So you said you went swimming in the river. Did you ever go swimming in the quarries after it was flooded?

Joe: Uh, not very much because I had to very careful that my father didn’t find out about it.

Sam: But sometimes… Sometimes did you…

Joe: Well, the temptation was there once in a while, especially up in the upper quarry because uh [gulp] that was easy access to get in and out of it without being caught, but uh, now, on a hot day in June if we got out of school a lil’ early there was always the temptation to go down for a swim. But we did a lot more swimming over in Jobs Pond which in that time we owned all the land all around it. But uh no, it was only because of some of my friends that wanted to go to the quarries that I would get caught down there but I didn’t get caught very often— it wasn’t worth it.

Sam: But it was a popular thing, lots of kids—

Joe: It was a popular thing for kids from eight years old to eighteen years old, but uh [40:00] yeah, swimmin’ in the quarries in those from ’38 through… see its only a few years that I was around much because uh in ’44 I left in the service, and they didn’t flood until ’38 so it was only about six years that it was flooded that I was around down after before I went in the service and after that the quarries were of no interest to me because I had to earn a livin’… uh and there was no work in the quarries so…
Rosa: Were you aware as a child or a young adult about the role that the quarries played in the history of Portland?

Joe: No, not really, but uh the only thing that I realized is when I got to be working age, so many of the older people that were on the job with me would be ex-quarry workers who would—if we were tryin’ to break a stone or tryin’ to move something, would say “Hey! This is the way you do that,” and they were always able—they know so many of the methods that the quarry used to handle stone and that both cuttin’ it and movin’ it that as… if you were workin’ on somethin’ and needed to move it and it didn’t move very easy, one of these uh ex-quarry workers would say “Hey you gotta put a little wedge under that, you gotta do this” and that and so you got to realize that these fellas were not in their natural thing but they were had good methods of doin’ things from the quarries. But that’s about the only connection I ever ran into in work at all was working with some of the old quarry people that knew the quarries.

Sam: Was this when you were working as the Director of Public Works?

Joe: Well, yes, even before that when I was in construction.

Sam: So lots of quarry workers started working in construction?

Joe: Well not a lot but quite a few, a big portion of the construction people that were there were ex-quarry workers because they had to find work and uh see after about ’48 or ’49 there was quite a big boom in public work construction and house construction and development and so forth so that the construction industry was a real calling card and I was relatively lucky in that uh… havin’ worked on the farm so much and drove tractors and that, that, uh… the first job I got I didn’t apply for, one of my friends asked me to come and drive trucks for them, and because I had drove trailers and had so much… and that… I had no trouble getting the truck drivers’ license and, and I was good to go. And then, so bein’ around with the trucks, I was talking to the bulldozer operators, the backhoe operators and that, and so when I’d be with them… I would practice with their machine a little bit and that, and I had a very good depth perception, uh, my eyes were very good as far as being able to carry a grade, and so that in the construction industry that gives a big advantage…uh this [incomprehensible]… lawns… over in Cromwell and some place round where their terraced like this and all go up and… I could take a bulldozer and make them curves, and that, make a lawn. And I used to get pretty good tips for doin’ some of them jobs for people. And that’s how I got into public works, is I was runnin’ the backhoe, [45:00] and I could dig… I started digging cellar holes, that was the big thing, and I could carry the grade so that when I finished digging it out, the depth on this side of the tunnel was the same depth as the one that’s over here and they could go down there and jus’ smooth it up and start pourin’ the concrete and I used to get little tips from the contractor for bein’ able to carry… so that I got a reputation within the construction industry so that I never had to go lookin’ for a job any time I got laid off from one contract there would always be another one within a day or two callin’ me up: “Joe! You wanna come on with the dozer? You know, you wanna come…” I poured the first concrete on this power plant across the river here with a crane from Marino Crane service with 120 ft. boom and 30 ft jib so that… to you, unless you’ve ever seen that operation… But the concrete mix trucks come and dump it into a big bucket that’s like a little bigger than a barrel, and they dump, and then the crane picks it up, and swings it over the forms, and the forms are
only eight, ten, twelve inches wide, up there, and you figure, with 120 of boom and thirty foot of jib, I was lookin’ at an area that was over a hundred feet away from me, and I had lined that bucket up so that the concrete when it came out the bottom had to fall into that space that wide, and, uh, so that, uh, but… I was very fortunate that I had that depth perception and I could line it up there, and you had to get man up there don’t worry… I wasn’t just doin’ myself, the guys up there would tell me this way or that way a little bit and follow the long forms, so but when they built the first of the power plant across the river here, I poured the first concrete over there, uh, with Marino, ya see Marino’s cranes are still around Middletown, and uh, but there was one of their cranes and uh… and that was strictly an invitation job… in fact I never got paid from Marino Cranes, I always got paid from the other contractor that he borrowed me from, I worked for Fernalee construction, and when Marino crane needed an operated on there, he’d get a hold of Fernalee and he’d say, “Let me take Joe for the afternoon,” and so I’d go down there, but, it kept me a job, kept me workin’.

Sam: Throughout your life, in construction and even constructing the buildings on this property did you always use concrete for foundations? Did you ever use brownstone for foundations?

Joe: No. Well, I shouldn’t say that. We do have a few things around here that have brownstone on ’em.

Sam: So the buildings on this property are brownstone?

Joe: Yeah, there’s a few but most of them were from scrap brownstone that was picked up, was never cut to fit a foundation. They were pieces of brownstone, uh, though, and in that other building used to be a brownstone foundation but we took it, pulled it all outa there because we wanted to re-grade down there, but uh, there’s no brownstone foundations that I know of left around here now at all

Sam: And when you wanted to re-grade it, you put in concrete ‘cause it would be easier and cheaper the second time…

Joe: Much easier, yeah, those masons or stoneworkers that could build a brownstone wall… like it intrigues me every time they look the same, every church here in Portland. Its got that big long brownstone wall along the side of the side parkin’ lot that goes all the way back there from the rectory out to the road. Its not— no mortar in it at all, its only put together with alotta little pieces of brownstone and big pieces of brownstone, and here’s a big long wall there, straight, and that [50:00] other pieces of stone. Those guys who could look at that stone and know which one was gonna fit and put that in there. It amazes me just sit there look at that wall. That they could do that. But it was a trade that people learned and knew how to do it. But uh the brownstone industry starts… see even the town hall buildin’, the old town hall down on main street that’s a police station now uh… was one of the last things, the additions on that was the last of the brownstone work around Portland that I know of

Sam: When was it built?
Joe: I don’t know, that was a... part of the addition... the upper part of Main Street toward the bank was probably in the late ‘30s or early ‘40s, uh, but at that time I assume that it was stone that was left over any of the decorative stone that’s in there, or, was left over from the brownstone area because there was a lot of brownstone around that had never been used in different areas, and uh, I guess if you’re really diggin’ around Portland today, you’ll still find a lot of brownstone... its not good brownstone, its stuff that the quarries threw away.

Sam: So not good because it’s not in perfect rectangles, or because—

Joe: No, because the grain in it wasn’t the way most of it because of the grain or cracks or what had.... that’s how that thing that had a dinosaur footprint in it ended up— it was dumped in a fill area, and we found it because we were puttin’ the sewer through there and this stupid big piece of stone was in our way and we dug it up and somebody said “Look at that! It’s gotta print on it!” “Do the holes wash off?” “Is it a dinosaur print?” “I don’t know. Let’s take it over to Wesleyan, see if they know.” So, that’s how it ended up at Wesleyan. But uh oh I dug up a lotta pieces of brownstone but they didn’t have anything interesting on them [chuckles].

Rosa: So during that time that you were construction, you were living here on this property still?

Joe: Why yes, yeah, in fact I lived in that house, what is now the three efficiency units over there. That was the house I built when I got out of the service. And orig— originally, I had that rented because before I was married I couldn’t afford to have— live in a house by myself— didn’t want to live in a house by myself. It was better to live with my mother and have her cook for me!

Rosa: Now which house did your mother live in?

Joe: The brick house down there.

Rosa: The brick house down by the river.

Joe: The brick house, and then when I decided to get married I, it was a friend of mine that was livin’ in my house over here, so I convinced my girlfriend to move into one of my father’s houses down by the river, and uh actually it’s the house that the manager lives in today, down there, and uh, so we moved down there, and we stayed there until uh, lets see...Kyle was born... yeah… it then we moved uh eventually we moved up here into this, and I and an aunt went and moved up here... original... bigger now than it was when I built it. And uh but that’s... where I lived down by the river when we first married, and uh it was cheap livin’ because my father owned the house and the rent was awful cheap [laughs].

Rosa: So your father was still run— he was running the hotel at that point?

Joe: Yeah, he was runnin’ it, until— he and my mother they quit the restaurant business after the war [55:00] in ’46 or ’47 and they got out of the restaurant business and started renting the building out to other people to run the restaurant. None of them were very really very successful. And in ’49 we had a real heavy snow storm, and a lot of buildings went down and the old
restaurant building went down. So, a guy had taken the ties out of the roof to put chandeliers up, so that’s when this building that’s there now was built in about ’49 or ’50. Uh, and it was built back at that time as a restaurant, and uh, so, but my mother and father never ran it. It was leased out from the day that they built it. And uh, so that and then oh, quite a few years ago it wasn’t workin’ out as a restaurant because anybody that was runnin’ was more wantin’ the liquor than they did food. They didn’t want to open mornings for breakfast, which was detrimental to the motel business. So we converted it to the antique shop.

Rosa: So that land is still owned—

Joe: Right, it’s still owned here. Everything from here up to Axelrod’s, on this side of the road, belongs to this place.

Rosa: OK, wow.

Joe: Axelrod Tire is up there. Right where Axelrod’s sign that the first sign you see there is right on the property line between us. In fact, Axelrod’s well is on our property. I had to give ‘em a permanent lease for his well to be on our property when he built that last building in there because the wanted to have water that he owned he had control of, and so I gave him a ten foot by ten foot square for his well out of our land. But, yeah, and uh about halfway between the Quickmarket up there and here there’s a fence you go down through the woods there just to the other side of the restaurant on the other side of the road is the boundary goin’ that way, so that from there to Axelrod is all this property. And on the other side of the road from this house across the road and it’s only a little bit left. There’s two or three houses over there— three houses over there that we still own on the other side of the road. But uh, sometimes I have trouble rememberin’ which one’s are what, but uh uh so… How we doin’ for questions? You got any more?

Rosa: Well I was just gonna say its been about an hour, um, so maybe

Sam: Yes, maybe we could wrap it up for today. We definitely have more questions, but, I don’t know how you’re feeling, if you wanna—

Joe: Oh, you can come back anytime. I mean, as you can see I don’t carry tons of thoughts for any length of time anyhow, but I don’t mind spendin’ time with you because I’m interested in seein’ how you do things too as far as the education and the school….what you’re doing to accomplish your degrees. I’ve… I got three kids that are so far different in their… well actually my youngest daughter and my son are quite similar, and uh they’re both uh engineers and uh but uh my son works for a company now that grinds up the computers

Sam: Old computers?

Joe: They make a lot of money getting’ the computers and that from insurance companies and banks and that and grindin’ ‘em up and burnin’— heatin’ em up [60:00] and getting’ the gold and the silver and the copper out of ‘em, and makin’ sure the FBI can’t get ahold of the hard drive and get any information off of it.
R: Talk about a shift in industry, you,....
INTERVIEW 2

Rosa: Okay, we’re rolling, this is Rosa McElheny and Sam Cohen of Wesleyan University talking to Joe Seiferman of Portland, Connecticut it is October 15, 2009, and the time is about 1:11 pm. Cool.

Joe: Uh-uh

Sam: So today we thought, um, we would use the floods in 1936 as a starting point, a jumping off point, and—

Joe: Um-hm

Sam: —and so, um, we’re interested to hear about your experience, um, so in particular maybe if our first question is what, what do you remember about, about the floods in 1936?

Joe: Well, the flood in 1936 was caused by a heavy rain up north on top of a large amount of snow. And so it was in March, ah, probably started to rise along about the… tenth or the fifteenth of March, the river was getting up a little bit, uh, on the nineteenth of March it was rising fast and, uh, I think it peaked about March twenty-first. But, uh, at that time, I know that March nineteenth because that’s my brother’s birthday, and, in that, back in them days, there weren’t very many neighbors in the area out here, but the friends that we had that lived way they my mother used to have quite a birthday party, for because of having a restaurant business and so forth they could do pretty big parties. And, uh, so it was invite a lot of our high school, or not high school back in them days, grammar school kids, uh and neighbors, and a variation of older kids right down to younger than us.

And on my brother’s birthday party in March of 1936, we realized that the flood was going to get into the cow barns, and so we moved our cows out of the barns down here and at that time we had quite a few cows, and we moved them up to a vacant barn at the Payne farm up the road head and, but we also wanted to move some hay and those kids worked all day takin’ hay out of the barn and loadin’ it into a truck and taking it up to the Payne farm. So that was impressionable on all of us that, that here’s the first time the flood had ever got into the barn. And, uh, nobody expected it to get as high as it did, in ‘36, but uh, actually, ‘36 and ‘38 floods were both very close to the same height, uh, durin’ that highest part of the ‘36 flood and I don’t remember what day it was, but a Coast Guard boat came in to the barnyard down there, and run right up to the three car garage that my father had and the guy reached down off the front of the boat, and put a brass nail in the beam on the side of the garage door to mark the high point of the flood in that area. And, uh, it’s funny because in 1938 hurricane, none of us expected to get tot hat same height, and it was within about six inches of the same height of water, about four to six inches lower here, and the ‘36 hurricane, uh, was strictly a rain that went up the Connecticut the river, so that it really came up quick, and that, uh, the snow melt went on a little more gradual although it was raisin’ pretty fast. But that hurricane that really sent the water down in a hurry and so, and, basically, that one had a slight backup the day of the hurricane from the Long Island Sound raising the water at Saybrook up enough so the tide came up the river, so, uh… that the hurricane had an early start but then it pe-peeked at about the same elevation as the ‘36 flood.
And the only other flood that ever got into that brick house down there was in 1927, and that got just about two or three inches of water in the cellar and, uh, the main floor and the basement didn’t get wet, but, uh, my father had it marked on the doorstep of the brick house, and when the ‘36 flood was comin’ up everybody said, “It won’t get any higher than that ‘27 flood.”

Rosa: So the 1936 flood was a major surprise for people, even in your parents’ generation?

Joe: Oh yes, yes, and we never expected it. My father even they when we were taking the cows out of the barn my father kept saying its not going to get any higher—

Sam: the nine days you said from the tenth

Joe: but all of a sudden it started comin’ faster and, and it was I think, I don’t think any of the older people, we were too young to know anything about it but everybody thought that that 1927 flood was a peak and that you wouldn’t get one higher than that. But we did. And then two years later, when the hurricane came, we got another one at about the same height here, so that, uh, and in that my father had been a selectman, of course in Portland he was very interested but he was also interested in, uh, his relatives and that in the surrounding towns, because he still had cousins and that living in Middletown and Cromwell, and that, and I remember going over with him, uh, up, uh, you know where Stop & Shop is in Cromwell, and the 99 Restaurant?

Rosa: Yeah…

Joe: Over there, in that intersection there, well, up on the hill where K-Mart and Expect and that are, uh, we went up to Glastonbury and got over the river and came down, uh, there, because there was farm, uh, in that triangle between Stop & Shop, and the 99 Restaurant, and the Dunkin’ Donuts, that area that’s built up now, there’s a carwash and that in there now. But there was a farm there, two story farm house there in that triangle and a barn, and, it was a cousin of my fathers that lived there, and, he, we went over at the height of that flood, the ‘36 flood, and it was getting to the second story on that house that’s in the center there. If you had a flood today, the same height as that ‘36 was, all you would see of Stop & Shop over there would be the top of their sign sticking out of the water.

Sam: [chuckles].

Rosa: Whoa.

Joe: And, uh, because that is a, is, uh, that whole parking area where Stop & Shop is just, uh, open river, at that, uh, to the river at that time, and where the 99 Restaurant is and Dunkin Donuts, they’d be so far underwater you wouldn’t know where they are

Rosa: So the flood did have sort of uh, a regional impact?

Joe: Oh yes, it did. And it, course, uh, Hartford, uh, was hit real bad, I never saw much of Hartford, I’ve seen a lot of pictures of stuff in Hartford, I had cousins that lived up there that told me about how the people had, canoes down where traveler’s insurance company was, and so
forth, paddlin’ around in the c—, in the city of Hartford, on some of the streets. and of course, then when the 38 hurricane hit two years later, in Hartford it was again put out with no power, no, all them insurance that and the travelers and all them were out of business, and, ahhhh, that’s when they appropriated the money to start building the dykes around Hartford, but it was the ‘38 flood that created the dykes because havin’ two floods only two years apart that put the city of Hartford out, and of course, every place was out of power, and both floods, the ‘36 primarily because these substations and that along the river where the power company had their sub was underwater and electricity and water don’t mix too good, so that uhhh what then of course ‘38 they had both wires down problems but —

Rosa: Right from the wind

Joe: But they also had short-circuted substations… so we had quite a long period with no electricity. And ahhhh… but then we had a minor flood in ‘55 that was ahhhh, a nuisance flood. it didn’t do the damage and it wasn’t anywhere near as high but …. But the river had behaved pretty well in the last few years

Rosa: so after that, after the first flood was there any mo— effort, to the as— after the 1936 was there effort to move things back from the….

Joe: Not really that I know of, uhh everybody just thought that that was the extreme and it would never happen again in their lifetime, so why spend your money on it to do anything about it. After the ‘38, there was movement in some cases, ahhhh, in Middle- in Middletown, there main power plant that they had by the river was taken out of there and they built a new substation that take care of distribution of power and that, because they couldn’t take another long term outage like that

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: And uh… and there was a few things that changed, uh, although… I don’t think there was a, lot that most people could do, as far as, making, preventin’ flooding and, ahh, that is to say, Hartford did, uh, started the dykes. Round here, it was pretty, and then, naturally, people didn’t rebuild the second time, uh, in some of the real flooded locations. But I know houses that get flooded on minor floods, and they’re still there, they clean up every time so that…uh…

Sam: In general, in the community, though, was, was there a very different reaction to the 1938 flood, or— you know, the sentiment?

Joe: ‘38 was such a disaster from, uh, the flood part of it was bad, but the trees down and that, uh, was the big, uh, problem that people couldn’t get home, couldn’t get, uh, on Main Street in Middletown. See back in them— in ‘38 we still didn’t have many chainsaws. Chainsaws weren’t really developed until the Second World War. So that, uh, n-everybody didn’t have a chainsaw to go out and cut there— [Joe gets tangled in his microphone wire as he makes expressive hand gestures] that’s okay, I’ll behave myself…

Rosa: [Rosa and Sam laugh] or you can put your hand—
Joe: oh, yeah yeah

Rosa: —over the cord.

Joe: They uh so that, uh, but you see that was the end, pretty much, ‘38 was when the, the, public works WPA projects and that, a lot so there were a lot of man power available, to work saws and that, but I know it was a week before they got Main Street Portland so you could drive up to it and they these men with two man saws sawing trees off the stumps and that, and they had a steam shovel that, a contractor in Middletown that was a friend of my father’s had brought over, and run for the town of Portland to pick up the stumps and so forth on Main Street, and get the big, and basically what he was doin’ as the men cut the branches off the big trees and that, he would pick ‘em up and cast them to the side of the road so that, uh, they could get Main Street open, up through but uh eventually he picked up a lot of the stumps and that, across the street there was an old town road over there, that washed out so bad, that my father decided that it was going to cost the town too much to fix it and they didn’t have any good use for it anymore because actually all it was was a connection between this road and Middle Haddam Road. It was the old road that used to come across this area before 1929, when this road was built through here, but after 1929 it was very seldom used, we used to drive cows to pastures on it and so forth, but, uh, nobody drove it much, few kids practiced with their old junk tractors and that stuff, but, uh, it wa— it was washed out so bad that they decided they’d just fill it in, and all the stumps off of Main Street and East Main Street and Fairview Street and that were brought out here, and they were buried over there, and there’s a house sittin’ over there today, and I’m not—I don’t remember how big the hole was, but I know it was full, but that road was abandoned at that time, filled in with stumps, for, and they worked for weeks, afterwards, bringin’, and gettin’ the trees off the roads, and uhh…. yep, all of the w— public work people that were working, cleaning up trees for a long time after that ‘38 hurricane… And, everybody had to cooperate pretty well. But, it was a lot a hard work because, uh, without, today, something like that wouldn’t be very bad, because with all the chainsaws and all the bulldozers, and all these small backhoes and that around, you could clear a lot faster, where, back in 1938, there weren’t very many big machines, and the few that were, were still pretty much steam, and, uh, uh that, what I don’t, that’s the hurricane as far as my own thing goes, and after the ‘36 flood, my father took the grates out of the big furnace down the big house, and had an oil burner installed, because, uh, he was sick of shoveling coal, and that, and his kids weren’t too good at it, so, he put an oil burner in. And, but he did it in the summer of ’38. And, he was smart enough to pull the oil burner out of the furnace and bring it up into the kitchen, on the kitchen floor, during the hurricane and flood.

Rosa: Whoa.

Joe: and so, then when he looked around and saw all the trees he had down, and everything, and see back at that time we were still doin’ farmin’ and so we still had a couple a farm employees working for him, so they started cuttin’ all that wood, he left the oil burner on the kitchen floor, and put the grates back in the old furnace, and we burned wood, and I think we were still burning wood when I went into service in ‘44, but I’m not too sure, uh, when it, but I know it was a woodpile down there for a few years that got burned up, after the hurricane because we had so much wood down around on the farm,
Rosa: whoa

Joe: so that, uh, but uh, it took a long time to clean up, that storm.

Sam: How would you say that the damage from the floods impacted life in the town, or did it impact life in the town?

Joe: Uh… I don’t know how much real impact it had on life. But it certainly affected an awful lot of people, there was… uhh, in that, they had ‘a clean up houses, and that. I think that it, again—it— around here, had it only been the ‘36 flood, I don’t think, people would have rebuilt and said, “oh it will never happen again.” But havin’ the ‘38 follow so soon, there, were houses that never got fixed. People just looked at it and said, “I’m not gonna try and fix that again, we just did it two years ago, and now look it? We got it, again.” So there were some of those cases, I don’t know how many, uh, personally contact that I had with the people that were, but I know there were people, and some of my friends had, uh… One, guy, just tore the house down, built a cabin there, and, where the house used to be, so he had a place by the river that he could go down, an, tie his boat up and that, but, uh, he built a new house, away from, on high land, [chuckles] because, uh…. And there’s no question, with, our stuff, here, that any of our buildings that we have down by the river that were affected by the flood were pretty much abandoned after the th— ‘38, and, uh, anything we’ve built down there since then is all six inches or a foot above [Sam chuckles] the floods—

Rosa: The ground, yeah the floods

Joe: yeah, so that, uh, there’s no longer any building in the… and of course then, later years the government come through and put that flood encroachment line on the river, where you can’t build closer to the river.

Sam: When did that happen?... Or, rec-recently or…

Joe: Oh, No, It happened, uh… back, I would say, probably in the late ‘50s. I know I was working for the town when they were doing it, uh, but they picked the area about the crest of the ‘36 and ‘38 flood, an elevation of twenty six feet or something above sea level, and they monumented it all the way down the river. I think it goes down to East Haddam, but I don’t think it goes beyond East Haddam, but it goes up the river all the way to the Massachusetts line—

Rosa: Mm-hmmm.

Joe: —and you can’t build without special permits within that channel encroachment line on the river. And it’s there to keep the floodway open, because they, they don’t want people filling any areas that store water… Uh… this… an area like those flats over there in Cromwell if you go up Route 9, going over there, you see the, wherever the, the high water and the river is, that whole big area that floods over there,

Rosa: Yeah
Joe: that helps protect downstream, because it stores the water there and lets it out later. So that’s why they don’t want, this channel encroachment line was put in, to stop people from filling those areas and that, because…uh, there— we need in case of another flood, for storage of water. But… I think that, that part of Route 9 is in the flood encroachment area, but of course the state and the federal government, when they’re building roads, they can do a lot of things that individuals can’t do.

Sam: Mm-hmm

Joe: But, uh…

Sam: Did, did people consider the damage done to the quarries to be a significant part of the damage in the town?

Joe: I don’t think so. Uh… I think that basically the quarry people, uh… were not as big employers, uh, between the two floods. Uh, in other words, they really, there were people that had been out of work after the ‘36 flood from the quarries, and found other, employment so they— I don’t know too much about that end of it, because I was pretty young—

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: then, but from what I heard and talked to people that were around at the time, I know some of them, said that after the ‘36 flood, we were out of work for almost a year, and so we found employment in other work.

Sam: Mm-hmm.

Joe: Uh, I knew fellow that worked in the quarries, movin’ big stones around and that stuff, and went to work for Pierson Screen Houses in Cromwell putting glass in the frames— you know, you used to kid ‘em about it, how heavy the glass was after movin’ stone — but, uh, he, he got the job a Pierson’s, and he wasn’t gonna leave it to go back to the quarries, after bein’ out of it for so long.

Sam: Well then, who— do you remember who was it that was working to rebuild the quarries? Because after the ‘36 flood, there was a rebuilding effort.

Joe: Yes, there was.

Sam: Was it not the original employees that were…

Joe: Oh, it was pretty much the original employees.

Sam: But not all of them…because they were…
Joe: [incomprehensible] Brainard, Shaler, Hall were a group of families that really owned most of it, and, uh… they… just after ‘38, they just didn’t have the money to do anything with it, so there was pretty much, at that point abandoned, really. It stayed, there. And they had a little bit of- of- [incomprehensible]…of that river front land the oil companies were looking to expand a little bit on, so, there was the possibility of getting a little bit of money for either leasin’ or sellin’ the land by the river, and uh…

Sam: Is that when the oil, because now there’s some oil tanks—

Joe: Oh, there’s oil tanks…

Sam: Is, did they come…

Joe: The oil tanks, basically, I don’t really know, uh, the oil tanks, were there I know in the ‘36 and ‘38 flood—

Sam: They were already there

Joe: —because— But I don’t think there were as many as there are now. But the only things I remember about the oil tanks in the flood, in the ‘36 flood there was… Portland, had two relatively new, they were… uhhh, probably 1932, ‘34 firetrucks. And they were both down there pumping water from the river into the oil tanks because what they wanted to do was fill them with water so that they wouldn’t float away.

Rosa: Whoa, okay.

Joe: See, if you just left them with oil in ‘em, and it wouldn’t be full of oil, and and they didn’t know how high the water was gonna come, and so the trucks were sitting there, and when the water was getting up around the tanks, I was down there with my father, uh, because they were hauling, uh, gasoline down to the fire trucks in five-gallon cans— pumpin’ for an oil company, but they couldn’t get their pumps, their electricity was off, so the gas pumps and that, at the oil company’s couldn’t be run, so the firetrucks, hauling the gas down in five gallon cans, and [incomprehensible] I remember being down there, watching em gas up the firetrucks while they were running, pumping the water into the tanks, and the…I don’t think any of the tanks ever were damaged, but, th-they got enough water into all of hem so that they stayed there.

Sam: um-um

Joe: but …

Rosa: What was it like being down there with your father? down when it was flooding?

Joe: Well, for a twelve or thirteen year old boy, very interesting [chuckles] and, uh, so that, yes, I, yes, think that I saw things like that that a lot of my friends didn’t see because their father [35:27] had other things to do, other than ride around town, looking for where ther-there was problems, whereas the first selectman, he was, guy had to appropriate the money for the gas for
the firetrucks to do the job, and had to assign people to do the work for the other emergency work, and so forth. Back in them days, you didn’t have, Portland didn’t have a police department, they had constables that worked by the hour for the town—

Rosa: Uh-uh.

Joe: —so, and basically, the selectman was the chief of police, he was the boss of the constables, so he told ‘em where to go, what to do, and uh, so, with his job, I got to see a lot of these things that… uh, even my brother didn’t see as many of ‘em because I was the older boy, and so he-he took his older son with him. I was the one, Joe, go get me a tape measure. Joe, go get me a flashlight. Joe, go get the camera [laughs]

Sam: Could you describe your time experience taking photos of the 1936 flood at the quarries?

Joe: Well… I know that uh, we took quite a few pictures, and, uh, but I don’t know I remember, uh, no I be—, I looked for those in Cromwell, uh, because I ran into some of the cousins that were over there at that time, and, but I can’t find them. But I think that…see, we, uh… my mother died first, and my father lived in the brick house for quite a while after that. But then he got to where he couldn’t live by himself, even though my wife, and my brother’s wife, and other people helped him. And we finally moved him up here… to we [incomprehensible], he… talked him up here, moving into one of his cabins up here, and then eventually he ended up living in my house with me, and then, he did in a convalescent home, but, uh,… in that he wasn’t in the brick house, or, and my mother was dead before we started to move anything out of it, there was never any organized movement of our stuff out of that house, and I know there was a lot of stuff left in the attic in that house, that the people that we rented the house to sold. Because, uh, I’ve been told by people that bought the stuff— “boy, we got a good bargain.” But it’s one of those cases where you do things because you don’t know any better. And uh, so that I, assume that there was lots of pictures and that stuff that got thrown out, that never got, uh, or, some of those tenants salvaged them and, and own ‘em today. And, uh…

Sam: But do, do you remember the experience of going down and taking the photos, because I’d be interested in hearing about you as an 11 year old boy a going down, and you know, what you saw. What do you remember from that, experience?

Joe: Most of, around the quarries, it was a case of, uh, my father had fairly bad arthritis in his hips, so that when, like, at the quarries, the pictures of the water first coming into the quarry hole, and that stuff, he just, “Joe, go down there and get a picture of that, the water’s gonna start comin’ in.” and I climbed down, and he stood up at the bank and hollered at me, “go over there, go over there,” and, uh, back in them days, you know, we, it wasn’t like today, where you could take twenty five pictures in a five minutes, ah, on a digital. It was eight or twelve pictures on a roll of film, so, you, you didn’t shoot a lot of pictures of any one object.

Rosa: Right

Joe: Uh… Today, I get a e-mail from my daughter with fifty pictures of her son running at a, a race up there or somethin’, and, uh. I look a few of them and say, well, let him keep running for a
while, see if there’s anything at the end of it [chuckles]. But it’s, all, so that, no, uh, lot of films were twelve, and some of them were only eight on a roll, so, you didn’t take a lot of pictures of the same thing.

Sam: Um-hm.

Rosa: But you knew, you know your father knew that this was something worth taking photos of.

Joe: Well he knew it was something that hadn’t happened before, and uh…there’s a …. they, the day of the hurricane, a big tree fell on his car at the town hall, and he didn’t get before they finished cutting the trees off of the car, and actually the car wasn’t damaged much.

Rosa: Wow

Joe: But it was where it was sittin’ a big limb hit here and a big limb hit here and the little car sat there, and it had a few scratches or little dents in it, but it wasn’t damaged much when we looked for it, “it’s under that tree there,” [chuckles] we didn’t think there was gonna be a car [chuckles] and actually, the big limbs held the, had landed both sides of the car, and so other than small stuff hittin’ the car, it landed, survived. And, uh…but it was two or three days that he rode around the old farm truck because he didn’t have his car, uh… And, uh, its, during the hurricane I chased signs around here. My mother didn’t know that it was a hurricane, she was running the restaurant business at the time, and they had, a few of those signs that are on…pl…you know…big as this part of the table they stood up like that they had said hot dogs on ‘em, or hamburger, or strawberry shortcake—

Sam: And the winds were [chuckles]

Joe: Oh they all blew up the road, and a few of the signs that were hanging broke off the things, and blew, and so all during the storm pretty much, uh, this one fellow that, one of the farm hands, was there that and, we, between he and I we chased signs most of the time during the hurricane, during the bad the part of the storm. And toward the end, oh I’d say, yeah, it was probably getting toward the end of the storm, there was a lady down by in one of our houses down by the river who, was—

Rosa: [whispers] oh my goodness.

Joe: —went into labor and her husband came up because, and, to my mother, to get a saw or something because a tree had fallen down across the driveway down there, and he needed to cut it, the tree to get the car out to take her to the hospital, so my mother sent this worker that worked for the farm, and me down with our farm truck to cut that tree. And when we came back up, he was with us, and she said, well, “you, you two guys go with them so if there’s any trees in the way between here and the Middlesex Hospital.” And, we stopped four or five times and cut trees for them to get to the Middlesex Hospital. And we pulled wires off Main Street in Middletown— there was wires down on Main Street Middletown, and the car couldn’t get through. And we hooked a rope on them and pulled them over to the side of the road, the old farm truck, and so that he got down Main Street to the Middlesex Hospital, and then, by the we
came back, we stopped had to stop a couple time more and cut stuff because stuff had fallen down while we were over there and uh, well the old farm truck, we didn’t care about scratching it, so if it wasn’t too big, we went through ‘em, but there was— I can remember a lot of wires down on Main Street Middletown, and traffic lights were hanging down…and that…

Rosa: Wow.

Joe: So, That wind blew, and, bein’ the first major hurricane like that, there was lots of things that were loose [45:00] to come down, and I think a lot of people learned after that that you put things up more solid than what we did earlier. Everybody… [incomprehensible]… All you had to do was hang it, stayed there a little breeze blow, but eventually, it was down in the hurricane, but, uh, so that, well I was, had interest in days of the storm, and uh…

Sam: Sounds like it. So really, so it sounds like the hurricane kind of stimulated a change in consciousness in the town, in terms of construction, after the hurricane, people really did think about construction in a different way, I mean….

Joe: If you drive around Portland today, and especially out through the country, and look at those concrete head walls on bridges—

Sam: Mm-hmm

Joe: and see how many of them say “1938,” “‘39,” [everybody chuckles] or “1940” on ‘em. Those were all wooden bridges, pretty much, that got washed out in the hurricane. So that whether you go up Reservoir Road or Lionel Road— there was one on Reservoir Road and up there that was out, the one was Thompson Hill Road turns off Reservoir Road, that one was out, where Cox’s Road comes to Rose Hill Road, that one was out. It was fairly difficult to get to a lot of places in Portland after the hurricane, because there was no bridge, and thanks to the WPA people that were on relief welfare at the time, they want to work right away rebuilding bridges, and some of them didn’t get built for a couple years, and, but that’s where you see WPA 1938, 1939, on the bridges, they all had that cast into the concrete when they poured the concrete for the head walls on the bridges, they got the WPA and the date on them, and ahhh, so that, and there, again, I ahhh, knew the foreman on most of them jobs so that the selectman’s son could crawl down to the brook and see what was going on down the bottom. Quite often, and that, and, ahhh, once ina while I got chased out by one of the foreman, but that was okay, I knew enough not to argue with them, because they would have told my father that I was in the way, I was in trouble, but they were mostly good, they were good to me, letting me get down in the brooks and so forth, see what was going on. But yes, there was a lot of places that was difficult to get to after the hurricane because the roads were washed out bad enough and bridges missing so that I forget how many brooks there are in a town until something like that happens, because there was a lot of wooden bridges up until, until that time

Rosa: Looking back, now, so looking back on that, would you say that those floods, the flood and the hurricane in 1938, have had an impact on your life?
Joe: Not really, it probably ahhh, made it, the, a little bit more respect for water, ahhh, of what water can do and so forth, ahhh, I know we were building the dam at the Portland reservoir, and, that’s not being used today, but the dam is still out there, and its still— the reservoir is still there. When in order to build a dam we build a steel-coffered dam across the end of the reservoir and that, and it was so about eight or ten foot between the old dam and the coffer dam. I never felt comfortable going down in there, I didn’t trust that [laughs] coffer dam to be down that far below water, yes, and that… and the space so I looked down there more than I went down, I went down there couple times before we had to decide whether we should try to move a rock or not we were afraid to dig out too many rocks under the old dam for fear that we would dislodge stuff (about 45:00) and, that… and we— so that we had to make a decision quite often when they were cleaning out down there to pour the concrete whether to remove a rock or to incorporate it into the concrete, cause, a new dam, and so. I did go down there some, but I was never comfortable down there.

Rosa: Are you, have you been reminded of the floods? I mean, I—I’m — I, I keep thinking of Hurricane Katrina, er, and, you know, do you ever find yourself thinking about that time?

Joe: Not really. Uh, no I never really reminded of it, to any extent, I respect trees and that and keep away from them, even if we get a real heavy thundershower, you don’t see Joe standing under a tree, because I know they do break. But, ahhh, no, I don’t think that the— had any real impression from uh, how we, and but, uh…

Sam: Either— either in terms of the end of the quarrying industry in 1938 or in terms of how all the wooden bridges, um, were washed away and they built concrete bridges, do you see the floods as kind of the end of an era in Portland, and then the beginning of a new?

Joe: It certainly made a— the two storms put together, definitely made it an impression on a lot of things in town as far as people go and that, but, uh, in the quarry business, and that, I think it was strictly a case of money, that there was still, but there wasn’t the market for the stone anymore really, so it wasn’t a case of where it was only not. They probably could have got the money if they could have showed a big enough market for the stone, but concrete and steel were the building materials by the time ’38 came around, and, so that uh… there… it was probably more decorative stone by that time than it was essential building material. And, uh, so that… and, as far as the town goes, Portland uh, always had some small manufacturing but not a lot. It had more than what it has today, uh… the at one point in time… Course, uh, the shipbuilding in Portland was pretty big back in the 1800s, and uh, there again the steel ships eliminated that business and uh, bought back in the Civil War days and that, it was, shipbuilding was a big thing up in Gildersleeve there, the Gildersleeve shipyard was built some pretty big boats, and, uh, so that…

Sam: As was the ships— people started making ships from steel then, after—

Joe: No, Portland never made steel.

Sam: Did— so, after the people— did Portland, was there ever an effort in Portland to keep up the shipbuilding industry but with new materials?
Joe: No, I think, I think that once Portland was a shipbuilding… they good… the Gildersleeves shipyard up there was there because they, the hills out there had lots of oak on it, and they needed the oak. And there was two or three four, I don’t remember how many all together, saw mills around that would cut that wood to into the size shapes and that that they needed for ship building. And, uh, so that uh, by the time that the floods came along [about 50:00] the shipbuilding had ceased up there so there was no but, the ’36 flood removed the last of the sheds that were left from the shipbuilding industry in that area, up where Petzel’s boatyard is today, that was the shipyard

Rosa: Huh

Joe: And, uh, see, there was a good place for it was very deep channel in the river right around the bend there

Rosa: Umhm

Joe: So they could launch a big boat there. And, ahhhh, so the shipbuilding ended, oh, before…

Sam: Yeah

Joe: Really any of the flood had anything to do with it. It was strictly a matter of the steel ships and that just, that not so, need for sailboats anymore. They were not really what I consider sailboats. They were—

Sam and Rosa: Yeah, yeah

Joe: Freighters

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: Now,

Rosa: Do you remember as a child hearing people talk about sort of a nostalgia for the era of shipbuilding and quarrying in Portland? Or, uh, sort of people….

Joe: Not very much.

Rosa: Not very much?

Joe: No, see, uh, when I was little, my father catered to New Yorkers, on the, and that was, buildings some of which are still left down there by the river, and so that I was much more inclined to play with New York kids that were not farmers, were not uh… they wanted the New York— type playin’ around and that stuff. Although, I used to get in trouble takin’ the kids in the barn, and so forth, uh, its, uh, goin’ playin’ in the hay lofts and that stuff, which my father didn’t like because if one of them got hurt in there, they were his guests, but uh, with his son unlocking
stuff and letting ‘em in, [chuckles] he had troubles. [laughs] But, uh, yeah I know in the summertime, uh, up until the Second World War, when the, the tourism really died down throughout that period, he was earning a good portion of his income from catering to New Yorkers on vacation, and so that they were my playmates because nobody lived around here, ways, there wasn’t anybody that I could see, but the New Yorkers were here in the summertime.

Sam: We’re also interested in how you were, as, as a child, how you were connected to the community in Portland. Because you lived on a farm, and you didn’t have too many close neighbors, you said, but did you, did you, attend community events, or—

Joe: No, I never played baseball, or any of the sports, even when I was in high school, because it was too hard to get home after the game nights, and—

Rosa: Huh

Joe: And uh, so that I was never really connected much with uh, the down, what we call the downtown kids. Uh, we…and it, at that time, there was six or seven, eight families of us that were all farm families, and for parties, we got together, the farm families, so that for my birthday, it would be some of these other farm kids around here that would be at my birthday, and I would get invited to their houses for their birthday parties and that stuff, but it was not the what we call the downtown kids, uh, the ones that walked to school.

Rosa: Well did your father’s role in town politics help make you feel more connected to the town of Portland?

Joe: I don’t know [~55:00] whether I felt any more connected, uh… I was very much aware of the Depression in the ‘30s. Uh, I went to St. Mary’s school, the Catholic School, and I couldn’t go down to the town hall at night or after school to go home with my father. I had to go down and stay out in the back yard until a constable could come out of the town hall, and come out and get me, bring me in, because when I would walk around there the welfare recipients would grab me and hold me for the hostage to get a new pair of shoes for their kid. Things were desperate in them days. Uh, I saw that and it the people that I know, uh, their, their kids, their parents woulda grabbed me if they got a hold of me as a hostage to try and get something out of my father or the selectman’s office for welfare, for food, for clothes, and that, uh, I also saw when they gave away dried beans and those, uh, rice, and stuff, and with the, uh, the girls that worked in the selectman’s office, probate office, the town clerk’s office, the assessor’s office, they all had to go out once I think it was only once a week, but it might have been twice a week, and bag up the dried beans, the rice, and so forth, and put it in one pound, two pound, three pound bags and that stuff, and then they had ‘em piled up in, in the garages out behind the town hall, and then the people got in line, and, there was this welfare director had you list, list of your name and how many kids you had in the family and so forth, and when you walked up she would say, two pounds of beans, one of rice, one of this, and that, and, these other girls would pick that stuff up and hand it to you, and you went and the next person came up and they called out I never heard call names, the one that I imagine the one that was there knew the names or the people told the name, but I was out, went out there a couple times, mostly to take a message from the selectman’s office out to one of the girls out there that so— and— so was comin’ and wasn’t on
the list or something like that. And they would send me out to give the girls a note, but then so that’s why I saw this goin’ on out there. But, uh, the depression was mighty bad and, uh, yes, there was no question that, uh, but there were other people in town that Mendello’s had a restaurant and they had to twin boys and there were in my class in St Mary’s School, and they used to invite me down to their house for dinner at noon, because they knew that I had carry my lunch, and all, I would have is a sandwich and usually nothing to drink, water from the fountain, and, uh, so that every once in a while they’d say, Joe, come down through, we’re gonna have spaghetti, and but so that I they’d have friends like that, that amongst other kids and that, but never after school at night because I couldn’t get ride home and that, but, uh, yes, the the Depression was, I show you the menu from the restaurant over there for ten cent [1:00:00] and no, well back in them days, they had, uh, I don’t remember it, but there were prices like that or, uh, on the one of the original menus that is over there in that office on the wall, that, uh, when you get a chicken salad for fifteen cents [chuckles] But that’s why they made money, is they grew the chickens, and that, so uh, it was a way of getting more money out of your chickens [chuckles] by sellin’ it in the restaurant.

Rosa: The, um, going back to, to your experience with the people on welfare at the selectman's office – how did that make you feel as a child? Were you aware of the whole situation?

I was aware that, uh, I was told by my parents and my uncles and that that a penny was worth a lot of money, and, my aunt would give us four or five pennies, and we’d buy penny candy with it, and split it with some of the other kids, I knew that we were better, that I was better off than a lot of my friends that way, but I also knew that I wasn’t gonna get a new jacket to if I got paint on my jacket, I wasn’t gonna get a new jacket right away, and, uh, so that I think that it, it impressed me a lot in seeing parents cryin’ over getting food and, that is something that I hope nobody has to see. It’s, uh, but it was bad. And, there’s no question it left an impression on me to, today, uh, I probably donate more tips to waitresses and to poor things than I would if I hadn’t gone through that, uh, because I realized that even today there’s a lot of people don’t have everything. And you know, you spend a lot of money to go to college, but there’s a lot of people in the world that can’t afford to go to college, and so that yes, I think is a permanent impression on you, to see grown-ups cryin’ over trying to get a pair of shoes for their kid. Yeah. So that, uh, yeah, it’s not a pleasant thought, but uh, we came through it, and the country is still here, oh,

Rosa: Does the impact of, um, you know WPA projects, and welfare, and your um, you know involv— your father’s involvement in the town, does that make you think differently about, um, so-social services, and sort of the…

Joe: I think that, um, uh, yes, to a certain extent, that I think that, uh, social services from a… welfare standpoint, went too far. In that made too many people dependent on uh… Roosevelt’s theory from, and I’ve looked at it, considerably over the years, from different people telling me, that, uh, taxin’ people to death so that they can’t have anything but what I give em and then they become thankful to me, so tax, tax, tax, and give, give, give, which… uh… I don’t think was a good system, it certainly— cause I don’t believe that it brought the end of the depression, in the thirties. What ended the depression in the thirties was the Spanish war, and the Japanese and Chinese War. When we first sold B-25s to China, to fight the Japanese, we were making the B-25s and China was giving us cash for our— the B-25s, so that that it brought— brought the
economy up back in the thirties, ‘36, ‘37, ‘38, and that it was not the welfare program that brought the economy up. That’s my own feeling, I mean, that’s…

Rosa: Yeah, no, that’s I think widely, discussed, yeah….

Joe: That’s, and of course, the Second World War, uh, put my first went to work for the town in public works, I was only in the water works at the time, but, uh, I’d hire high school kids to read water meters and that for me, and I the first I ran into a attitude that I had never realized before, uh, that these were the kids whose parents were born in ’17, ’18, ’20, that in had got out of high school in the thirties, ’34, ’35, ’36, an that area, couldn’t find jobs, or worked for peanuts if they did find a job and that, and by the time that they got they made money during the war in the defense industry and that, and had this attitude that my kids are never gonna have to do what I had to do, working for somebody else, and that, these people had made money during the war, had now they had these high school age kids, that were looking for a job, but you should give them felt boots to wear, and, uh, motor vehicles to ride in, they shouldn’t have to walk. And that attitude amongst the parents that, you can’t tell my son what to do, he’ll read the meters when he wants to. And, uh, but there’s that whole generation that got out of school from 32 to 38 about six or eight year period there, they had an attitude that nobody is gonna have to do what I had to do, and… Especially their kids, and I ran into it not just one but in a number of cases and so that, uh, there was no question that there was a hangover into the forties from the depression. That, and, uh, but… I don’t know… whether we’re better off or not, [chuckles] yeah… but it did leave an impression on me, as far as—

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: That stuff goes. Uh… and here I’m gonna be eighty four in October, I’m still workin'.

Sam: When’s your birthday?

Joe: Huh?

Sam: When’s your birthday?

Joe: October twenty-ninth.

Sam: October twenty-ninth that’s coming up, that’s exciting.

Joe: October twenty-ninth I’ll be eighty four. So, let’s see, so, in 1938, you see, I was thirteen, to play around doin’ things

Sam: Did your experience during the great depression in the early nineteen thirties instill in you a, a kind of desire to work, or a love for working?

Joe: No, I… uh… know that I was darn good at picking strawberries because so many of these kids that my father used to bring out after school nights to pick strawberries— could pick strawberries so much faster than I could, but I guess they didn’t stop to eat as many [laughs] but,
I, uh, yeah, I, see kids were picking strawberries there in, when I was eight or nine years old, ten years old, for penny a quart, and, there were sending them to the Hartford market for twenty cents or twenty-five cents a quart, and, uh, but it was, uh, yeah, those kids worked hard for a few cents. But they could pick better than I could... And so... But it’s, so I mean, you, you haven’t, you’re about to be 84 and you’re still working, you’re not doing manual labor, you’re not picking strawberries, but you have worked your entire life, you definitely working, do you think your value for work was something... I think the value of work, uh, was instilled in me from my parents, that work, and that. And that, there was I was very seldom ever to where you could have it just because you want it, it was you want to earn it, go to work for it. And my wife was even the better handler of work than I was, I think. And she’s the one that really built this business up, while I played with the town... and that, but, uh, yes, work ethic is something that I don’t know how you develop it, but oh, it, my brother and I were working on a pipe down here before lunch, [chuckles] and we, at our age, we bother with it, not call a plumber to do it, but we’re taking the wall down to get at the pipes [laughs] yeah, now that yes, I think that the work ethics is..... Worthwhile if you can develop it, but [Rosa laughs] uh, you’re gotta be developing in that you’re doing additional work to get ahead in school.

Rosa: Yeah, I think, I think, people definitely still value a work ethic, I mean it’s, I think for us it’s our grand parents generation experienced the depression, and so it definitely like you keep hearing about depression, you know, and that, specific mentality, that grew in a certain generation of people, and I don’t think that we have that same notion of it, but I think it’s, it’s def— it’s tot— it’s part of American culture, is a, a strong work ethic.

Joe: Yeah, it’s, uh... my kids... all have been fairly successful in what they wanted to do. Uh, my son is kicked around a lot, he went to Worcester Tech and got to be a an industrial engineer or something, I don’t know, he’s got some kind of an engineering thing, and he moves around for different companies and that, by now, he’s with a company that grinds up computer so that you can’t, there’s government, can’t take a hard drive and find out what’s on it, and they salvage the gold, the silver, and so forth and the electrical contacts and that, salvage what good out of the computers and but, when they finish with the computers, all the insurance companies and that send their computers to those people, the get rid of em, and uh my... oldest daughter, she’s a nun, and she works, she went to St Anselm’s and became an RN, and she decided she wanted to teach nursing, and so she went to Boston College or Boston University, someplace in Boston I don’t know, and, uh, to write prescriptions if she was gonna, so she went back to UCONN again, uh, and got her degree so she could write prescriptions so forth and, uh, she worked for UCONN for a few years, and, uh, mostly in children end of it, but, uh, and then, the, the youngest daughter, she went to RIT, up in Rochester in there, and so electrical engineer, and then by the time she got that she decided that they had a new course that they were starting back at that time, of computer engineering, so, and so she went for a couple years more for computer engineering, and she got a job with Kodak, and Kodak gave her a year or two that she worked very little of her Kodak, but she had to get a degree in management or something, uh, so that she’d been project engineer for Kodak. And she’s, uh, built cat scan machines for Kodak, and, uh, one of the last she was working on was one for checking for breast cancer without you having to lay down or that, uh, another machine to do it standing up—

Rosa: Oh wow
Joe: And, uh, so she still with Kodak and every once in a while she does something, she worked on printing equipment too for Kodak, they can decide to change the colors here with the computer without—

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: Doing anything, and they can put, digitizing everything and that, and, uh, but… and she’s still with Kodak, and uh, so that the three of them are making a living, [laughs] oh…

Rosa: Well, they sound very successful

Sam: Sounds like they’re doing well for themselves

Joe: They don’t have any interest in makin’ beds [laughs] or cleaning bathrooms [everybody laughs] nope… but, uh, yeah… but, that’s it, so that, I think that you’ve got about all the information that I know, that I can give you…

Sam: I think for now

Rosa: It’s been, yeah—we’re about up to time…

Joe: And ahhh,

Sam: Although, I think you, that, that was—

Rosa: That was really, really interesting—

Sam: But there are other, so I think for now, we can call it—

Rosa: —Call it a day

Sam: Call it a day, but we would, I think, like to meet with you again, because we have some other questions we’d like to, if you wouldn’t mind, we’re also interested in hearing about, you’re, the work you did with the town… the time you spent working as the director of public works, and so, we, we have some other topics we’re still very interested in hearing about

Joe: Basically, I enjoyed public works because I had a lot of freedom, the selectman at the time, when I worked there, were very easy-going with me, and it wasn’t too bad I had a girl that worked for us at that time that was very good grant writer, and she got me a lot of grants for putting sewers in and water lines and stuff like that, over the years, and but, one of the selectmen decided that she was not needed which was a big mistake but it ended the grant for quite a while, but, uh, I probably installed close to half the water lines that are in Portland today, the main lines. And probably two-thirds of the sewers that are in Portland today, that were… Because since I retired ten years ago, or more, they’ve done very little.
Rosa: Yeah

Sam: Um hm

Joe: But it’s the case of where my replacements didn’t have the energy to go out and do the jobs,

Sam: Yeah

Joe: One, was too easy to sit in the office and let things run, and there had to have been a big expansion of subdivisions and that that there was when I was in there,

Rosa: Right, yeah.

Joe: You take from 1950 to 1980… was a big area of subdivisions and expansion of homes and that in Portland. So that, there was reason to put in a lot of new sewers, a lot of new waterlines and that. And, uh, uh… that….

Sam: Well, we’ll get to all that next week.

Joe: Um hm

Sam: We’ll, we’ll come up with some questions, because it is very interesting. Well here, so what, or actually, what you would say about meeting next or, next Thursday, would that work for you? Next Thursday at this same time?

Joe: Yeah,

Sam: When do you leave to go up o the hotel con— convention?

Joe: Uh, the twenty-fifth of October.

Sam: So next, I believe that next Thursday is the twenty-second.

Rosa: Yes, you know, I’m rooting around because I have a planner in here, we can check the date.

Sam: I remember I had mentioned that, I don’t remember if that’s okay with you

Rosa: Um… [pages turning] next week is our midterm week…

Sam: Oh,

Joe: You, you don’t wanna work during midterm week, oh, boy

Sam: No, but
Rosa: Yeah, so next Thursday is the twenty-second and that’s fine.

Joe: Yeah, that’ll be okay

Rosa: That’ll be okay?

Joe: Sure. I’ll write it down over there, but Beth’ll probably have to wake me up when you get here… [laughs]… sure

Sam: Ok, oh yeah

Rosa: Cool

Joe: And if anything comes and you don’t, just, don’t worry about it, in the least, because I’m staying around here anyhow, and, uh, we can always make another time if something comes up and you don’t tie up, because I’m not necessarily, uh, programmed around here. Beth programs me [chuckles]…

Rosa: That was Beth in the office—

Joe: Yeah. She’s been working with us since .[cuts out]
INTERVIEW 3

Rosa: Okay, well this is Rosa McElheny and Sam Cohen, talking to Joe Seiferman of Portland, Connecticut. It’s October twenty-second and the time is 1:45 pm. Okay.

Joe: Yes, we’re all set. There’s a picture, I leaned out off the bridge in order to get the picture the coast guard cutter.

Rosa: This is the railroad bridge?

Joe: Hmm?

Rosa: This is the railroad bridge? Which bridge is this?

Joe: Yeah, the railroad bridge.

Rosa: Okay.

Joe: Yeah the rail… that’s right. Cuz it never went through the railroad bridge I think. But uh… I don’t… [incomprehensible] There’s uh… where the pretty good picture of the roadway where it ga— gave way. See the railroad cars that are still left… The others are floatin’ in there…

Rosa: This is the river or the quarry?

Joe: That’s the quarry.

Rosa: That’s the quarry. Okay.

Joe: That’s the quarry. And actually in the ’36 flood it was hard to tell where the river ended and the [incomprehensible] started. But uh… this… uh… of the… troubles down there. They had… see… a lot of their equipment up top got damaged in the flood.

Rosa: Did you take most of these?

Joe: Hmm?

Rosa: You took most of these photos?

Joe: Oh yeah. Yeah, I was… had a… was a little camera crazy kid… and… and so uh… This I think was taken from over in Middletown lookin’ back toward Portland, the oil tanks and that, with the bridge’s in tanks in the picture, ya see.

Rosa: Oh cool.

Joe: Cuz, we did go around a lot… And there’s an original picture that I climbed down in the quarry before it flooded, that— that’s the water first startin’… over across the road, running
down the hill into the quarry… See you don’t notice the water in the quarry at that time, is so far
down you don’t see any water. But its its startin’ to come across the road, washin’ into the
quarry.

Rosa: So the river is behind these…

Joe: Yeah, the river’s, the river’s behind the railroad cars, and I’m down inside the quarries, see
this is part of the quarry wall here. And and I crawled down into the quarry, cuz my father
wanted to get a picture of the water startin’ to come across the road into the quarry… because…
[incomprehensible] because about an hour after this or less than an hour I guess it was, it washed
the road out, and that when the riv— the water really started to pour in… fill the quarries up, but
that’s when it took the railroad cars and that along with it.

Sam: How long did it take for the whole quarry to fill up, to reach the level—

Joe: Oh, I would say probably less than two hours. Uh, because we stayed there until it was level
across. And uh… that’s how come I had the picture of the cars floatin’ around in there. They
were taken mostly from the same area of high ground over towards Middlesex Avenue, then, of
the quarries… but… see… I just brought a few of these pictures to show you what the land
looked like… see… see this is after the quarry flooded, probably taken the same day, ya see.
Some of the railroad cars where the train broke off that weren’t hooked to the other… and uh…
taken from down in the quarry lookin’ at the debris floatin’ around… Some of these I should
have… uh… [5:00] put labeled 25 or 50 years ago because that’s Main Street in Portland I’m
pretty sure… these… the houses are not too well off…

Rosa: Who were the people in this photo?

Joe: Hmm? I don’t know who the people are. They were… somebody was walkin’ down lookin
for what was goin’ on there, and uh… probably some homeowners that were wonderin’ if their
house was gonna be around much longer…

Rosa: How long did the water stay—

Joe: Hmm?

Rosa: How long did the water stay like this?

Joe: A week from… it reached a high point and only stayed there for a matter of twelve hours or
so and then it gradually started going down. But, it was about a week from where it started being
a real nuisance until it got back to where it wasn’t a nuisance any longer. And, if you lived in one
of those houses, you wouldn’t want to [incomprehensible]… but… the [incomprehensible]… See
I think this was taken from the other side from where the water came in from up the high land
from that lock that’s there, you see… and… this was probably at the high point of the river, see
how its almost over the road over here too, over on the other side its up there…
Sam: So on the other side of this… So here can you see the river… See the river’s kind of in between the trees and the rocks over here…

Joe: See, yeah… That would be high water, cuz there cars here still up on higher land over there… but uh… there… ya know, when you go down town to Route Nine near St. John’s Church there, when you go down there on the right hand side wall, up quite high over the tops of the cars but just below the railroad tracks, there’s a plaque on the wall of the high line of the flood.

Rosa: Whoa, Okay.

Joe: So, the water was almost up to the underpass there, up to the railroad track there, at that point in the ’36 flood. And the state put a plaque in the wall— its not very big— its just a little thing, a little line, but it’s a… and the state used to have a garage down there under the bridge, and that was there garage under the bridge, down where actually is… uh… where Bridge Street goes there… but anyhow that’s a lot of the pictures of… from here… and uh…yeah…[incomprehensible] all old… and not too much stuff… But anyhow there are pictures of the floods.

Rosa: Did a lot of people take photos of it?

Joe: Uh, yes, I think they did, but uh… a lot of people woulda had trouble being able to get to places because the police and that were restrictin’ the… The National Guard was around a lot of the places, and because of my father being selectman I could go with him and uh… take pictures and that and we could go… The National Guard would let us through… so that helped me get a lot— a lot of areas to to take pictures that everybody couldn’t…. I don’t think anybody else could get down into the quarries like I did. [10:00] The police would have stopped ‘em. But, uh… because of my father bein’ able to go down, then this little boy could go too. So that’s how a lot of pictures got, for me… I was with him all the time. And he didn’t call around very much cuz he had very strong arthritis in his hips, so it was very painful for him to crawl down— up ladders and that. Jo-Jo could go. Yeah… But uh hopefully we’ll never see another flood as bad, although I’m not convinced that we couldn’t get a worse flood, because of so much… dykes and restrictions that have been put on the river up north, uh…

Sam: Has the town of Portland taken precautions. Or when you were working for the town— I mean has the town of Portland done anything to prevent something like that from happening?

Joe: No, uh… we built like our surge pumpin’ stations. They’re all top entrance… most of them are at the crest elevation of the ’36 ’38 floods. And like, that the surge treatment plant the tanks down there are all about a foot above what the ’36 ’38 flood was. So, if we got a bigger flood, they would have trouble, but in that we all thought we’d never see another flood like the ’36… and hopefully we don’t. Because there’s a lot more buildings and that that are in the area now. Of course, I don’t remember when it was, it would be sometime in the ’60s or early ’70s that the river encroachment lines were established all the way down from Massachusetts to the ah past East Haddam, which means you can’t build anything within the elevations of that flood. And so that that it partially protect uh… from havin’ the property damage and also personal liability so
people could be in there if they get another flood… so that… the channel encroachment line is pretty well drawn all the way from— I think from Massachusetts line all the way down to East Haddam, that… I know where it is down here because we have to stay back of it to build anything. And I was forced, when I was workin’ for the town like in the Portland landfill area where there are recycling places now, we couldn’t fill beyond that encroachment line, so that… There has been some things done to mitigate another flood, but uh… I hope that we never see it so… but see the ’36 flood was a rainstorm that went up the Connecticut River Valley. A warm rain came up in March when there was a lot of snow up in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, or Vermont and New Hampshire primarily, and the warm rain went all the way up, it melted all the snow at one time, and down it came. In ’38 two years later, it was the hurricane that went up the Connecticut River Valley and dumped a lot of water on everything, and brought the river up faster I think than the ’36 flood as far as the raising goes, because Long Island Sound backed up with the water being pushed into Long Island Sound. That’s why New London, and Saybrook and those towns had so much damage in the ’38 hurricane. More from water than from wind. Wind damage was not very s-much other than for trees in the ’38 hurricane. We lost an awful lot of trees. And there again that was unusual storm because it rained for a couple weeks before the hurricane came. Just normal rain so that we had a lot of… so all the tree roots and that were wet and soggy in the ground, which made ‘em pull out much easier. A lotta trees came out cuz very little dirt came up with the roots, they just pulled outa the ground or plain over. Not that there was no dirt. There was big chunks, but there wasn’t… they pulled out much more so than they would have had it been dry before the storm… but the ground was pretty wet before the ’38 hurricane… so…

Rosa: What was it like to— You mentioned going to New London with your father to see the damage from the hurricane…

Joe: Oh yeah, well it was… uh… it was amazing to see uh… railroad cars off the tracks and boats on… There was a big boat, a big freighter up on Main Street in New London, and uh it was probably 150, 200 foot long boat up on the Main Street, and it had taken down all of the poles, the wires, and everything in that area of the city… Had probably made some dents in some buildings but I didn’t get to see everything. I can remember the boat, but I can’t remember details of what was going on there. But it was certainly a very interesting thing. A lot of people lost their lives in that Hurricane down by the shore… It wasn’t anything that was trivial or anything. It was a serious situation. And I don’t think there’s anything they can do in places like that to protect them from another hurricane if we got the same type of storm. Long Island Sound is unique in that it has a big opening out there of [incomprehensible] Rhode Island, and a very small… end down there at New York City, so the wind can blow the water into Long Island Sound, and build it up, and it can’t get out down the other end at New York, so the Sound just rises. And you’ll see that every once in a while in the weather forecast now…that… Unusual high tides, wind blowin’, they’ll give the weather forecast… six foot above normal tides in Greenwich and some of those places along the Sound. And most of that is caused by wind blowin’ into the Sound… uh… so that another hurricane…[incomprehensible]… could make damage down there bad… but… its… there’s certainly it was a very damaging storm but… because the heavy rain was so heavy that all the brooks an’ a lot of the brooks got debris, trees and stuff in ‘em so that weren’t flowin’ as good as they should’ve, and so the water got higher than it should’ve… all the old wood bridges didn’t survive.
Rosa: Yeah that—I just heard about the um… there’s this steel bridge in the first… steel bridge in Wallingford maybe or something… Woolbrook or something… that did survive and it’s like, total relic.

Joe: Yeah… so that uh… Yes, the… it was the end of the wooden bridges on a lotta brooks, a lot of places around here… so that… So what do we need to know now? Anything more?

Sam: Lots of— well, um we’re interested in many other things. One thing that we’re interested in was um… [20:00] you’re time in the war, a little bit. Well, so in 1944 you were drafted, and you left for the war. So one of the things we were— so we were interested in talking to you a little about that, but in particular, what it was like coming back. Do you remember what it was like coming back to Portland after your time in the war?

Joe: Yes, because uh… I stayed out in the Pacific, uh, after the war ended for I don’t know six months or so, I don’t know. I had primarily because uh… People probably… history is followed up a little bit and knowin’ what happens really… In my interpretation, uh… When Truman used the atomic bomb to end the war, there was a lotta guys like me who were very very happy, because we had been training for the invasion of Japan, and we knew that the Japanese were not gonna be easy to get… un… and we were training down in the Philippines to… because the United States had lost so many people tryin’ to get their initial people ashore both in Normandy an’— in England, that campaign. But also, on Okinawa, Iwo Jima… and… those battles that we had after we had been able to built up all the landing craft that that we still couldn’t get the initial people ashore without losin’ an awful lot of them… So the Marine Corps in the outfit that I was with and B-25 bombers decided that we had lots of airplanes now, and we’re gonna use the airplanes to make a path for the LSTs and landing craft to come ashore. And we were practicin’ that down in the Philippines… uh, to make a path… and what we were doin’… we take… we went with groups of twenty-seven B-25s and go— but we pair off three planes abreast, and go in and machine gun— we had lots of forward firing fifty count machine guns and them, machine gun the beaches and then we had uhhh ten or twelve hundred pound anti anti-personnel bombs in the— on our bomb bay. And with the three planes that come in side by side and each one of us would drop our bombs about every fifty feet. And an anti-personnel bomb would knock this buildings down, and so an ‘those things it blew apart and it would chop trees off and uh chop heads off if there was anybody there… it would make a path so wide and so that [incomprehensible] and we’d turn and go back out for few, and the ones behind up would [incomprehensible] sp they’d make a path nine planes wide, uh, inl— inland and with the big groups of planes, then the landing craft could come right into the shore, and nobody on shore could see them to— close enough to be able to blow ‘em up like we— like they did in Germany and also on Okinawa and Iwo Jima and them islands— them… that was our big problem. Once our marines got ashore, they could overcome the Japs pretty good. But the Japs got too many of them before they ever got ashore so that’s what we were practicing for the invasion of Japan… We all knew it wasn’t gonna be an easy thing. And when Japan surrendered, Starling called up Truman and said “You take the Japanese surrender in Japan [25:00] and I’ll take it in China.” Because see Ja— Japan had in uh had invaded China, an’ Northern China was all in control of Japanese. And Stalin wanted to move into Northern China and take Northern China. Truman said “No, no. I’ve already got a couple of marine division on the LSTs…” Some of ‘em had already
left Hawaii for the invasion of Japan, some of them had left the Philippines for the invasion of Japan. So the were already on boats. So Truman diverted ‘em into Northern China. Tsing Tao, Pe Ping, Ten Sen. That… and we were still down the southern uh Philippines practicing for the invasion and we got the orders for all the bomber crews to go back to Hawaii, and when we got back to Hawaii, a lot of our guys had time enough over there we’d been over there fourteen—fifteen months, and my group was… and so we could go—get discharged… except that the pilots and navigators, they didn’t have enough pilots and navigators for transport planes that Truman wanted to supply his troop that were goin’ into China because those guys were all in battle fatigues to go into the invasion of Japan at that point in time. So when he diverted ‘em up into Northern China they wore short sleeve shirts, cut-off pants and that. And Northern China even at— in September is *cold*. And so we got… went and flew back to Hawaii and the pilots and navigators got put into transport planes to fly— we flew everything out to China from all sorts of winter clothes to ping pong balls [laughs]… everything that… uh… but, we were makin’ a round trip to China with those old C-46s and that in three days, flyin’ twenty-four hours a day, so they had two pilots, two navigators, and a mechanic on board.

Rosa: And you’d just carry enough fuel to go…

Joe: We would— we would go like from Hawaii down to Johnson Island, probably down to uhhh Guam or [incomprehensible] or one of them, and then over to… at that time uh Iwo Jima was a s—f—refuelin’ base. We could go into Okinawa and refuel because we had control in Okinawa. And we’d go up to Shanghai and the navy had set up facilities at the Shanghai airport. We could refuel there. And then we’d go up the coast of china to Tsing Tao, Hen Sen, Pe Ping… uh and supplied the— the guys had come ashore there, and then comin’ back sometimes, uh after oh, about the third or fourth trip, they had secured an airport and Japan’s south of Tokyo that we could re-refuel at. So if the winds were blowin’ good—out in— the winds out in the Pacific there blow pretty strong, and they blow from Japan to Hawaii, that direction, blowin’. So if the winds were blowin’ strong we could refuel there in Japan and fly all the way into Wake or Midway, and then into Hawaii direct flyin’ back, and then we would get—our crews would get three days off, get to go into Honolulu and party for three days, but then we’d take another plane out. But we flew twenty-four hours a day for three days. We didn’t stop to sleep. You could sleep in the plane while you were flyin’. So the pilot would sleep and the co-pilot would fly. The navigator would sleep, and the other navigator would navigate. And don’t forget we didn’t have GPS and [incomprehensible] and that stuff in them days. It was strictly the stars. [30:00] So that, that’s right. I was out there for, oh, I don’t know, two— a coup— two or three months after the war ended before I got to come home. Once I got to come home, I got out pretty fast because I was overdue for discharge as far as points go and that, and I got a nice sergeant on the west coast there that gave me a thirty day furlough and about twenty five days travelin’ time to come home, report back to Cherry Point, North Carolina. And I got back down there and I came up to Washington there and got myself out of the thing, so uh… but… But when I got home uh did you ever hear about the “Fifty-two Twenty Club”?

Sam: You told us about the “Fifty-two Twenty Club”.

Joe: That was good, but uh—
Sam: It's just fifty-two weeks—

Joe: So that's why— that's when I built the building that's over across there— something to do that winter, because there was a lot of us that didn't have anything to do. Very few of the factories were in production to any extent. Because there were so many of them retooling and that. And so that I actually, uh, went to work, uh, for a construction outfit, Butler-Sand at the time, and uh— its not the same Butler-Sand that's here today. That's a different guy but its uh— had the same name. And that's when I got involved in uh runnin' equipment and that. And then from there one fall, the [incomprehensible] construction shut down for the winter, I went to work for an oil company for a little while.

Sam: Well, before we— I wanna talk about your working, but before we— before we get on to that, maybe could— do— we could talk a little more about when you got back from the war. Do you remember if you though the town had changed at all?

Joe: No, I don't think— Well, the town had changed to one extent is that my father was selectmen when I went in the Service and he was postmaster when I came home [laughs]. That was the biggest change to me. But, now I don't think the town, uh, changed a lot, because, uh, the manufacturin’ in town was slowed down for— with the— again the change from war material to domestic products, but uh… As far as most of the town goes there wasn't much change I don't think that…

Rosa: Were you part of a group of people who were drafted… um… like were your other friends— did your other friends serve in the war? People your age?

Joe: My age?

Rosa: Yeah.

Joe: Oh yes, a lot of people my age. See, uh, in 1943 I think it was the end of ’43, they uh… changed the draft age and I don’t remember just how it changed, but they had first moved— they dropped it from twenty-one down to eighteen. But also, in that area of time we were runnin’ out of people with the war on two sides, Germany and Japan, and they increased the age uhhhh, see in-initially they only took people up to thirty years old or so— twenty, twenty-five, twenty-eight, it was a very narrow group of people that were drafted in 1941 when the war first started, but they used up that pool of people pretty fast, and so they raised just before I went in, they raised the draft age up to thirty-seven or thirty-eight— somethin’ like that, so uhhhh when I went in it was eighteen [35:00] year old kids and thirty-five thirty-six thirty-seven year old men, so uh… that were goin’ through trainin’ together. Nobody in the twenties, they were already in there.

Rosa: How did you feel when you knew you were gonna have to serve in the war.

Joe: Well, I don’t think that— I tried to get in to, uh, the Navy, uh, aviation training, and they wouldn’t take me because I had an operation on my leg when I was a kid, and they decided that they wouldn’t take me, and so that basic I was drafted to the Navy and transferred to the Marine Corps, and transferred to aviation. Then went to Navy aviation school, was a navy, uh, na—
navigation school that I went through to uh, become a marine aerial navigator, and uh, tried to learn the stars. I look up there every once in a while now and say “Boy, I can’t remember the names of them stars” [laughs]. But uh… Yes the… but as far as my high school class, it had been very active uh with reunions. We’ve had a reunion every five years since we graduated in ’44.

Sam: Wow, so you’ve kept in contact. You see them ev—

Joe: Yep, yep, and we have a couple people that send us out changes of addresses for people, at least once a year, so that if you move from here to there, they’ll— and they get ahold of your address, they’ll send it out so we keep… Uh, the class is getting’ smaller all the time, but uh, we are… next week from today I’ll be eighty-four. So…

Sam: Have many of your classmates stayed in Portland?

Joe: Yes, uh… quite a few of them are around here. Uh, oh that’s a few of them that are down south and spread out, but uh, there’s a few of them still left here, although gettin’ to be fewer and fewer of ‘em, so that’s a problem.

Sam: Did you imagine when you came back from the war, when you came back to Portland, did you imagine that you’d be living in Portland for the rest of your life?

Joe: No, I, uh, in fact I think my brother was convinced I was gonna marry a girl down in Atlanta, and uh… No, I had travelled enough in the service around that so that, but I don’t think I ever really found any place that I really wanted to be permanently, and of course, there was a financial situation to try an’ support myself without getting’ the little subsidy of havin’ a free bed, sleepin’ nights [laughs] so that basically I uh… I worked around the farm here that summer when I got home… put the [incomprehensible] in for the corn and that stuff… uh… but my brother was gettin’ sick of farmin’ too at the time, so that… it didn’t take too long, we got to arguing, who was gonna milk the cows on Sunday, and he decided to sell the cows [laughs].

R: So your brother was in charge of the farm when you came back from the war.

Joe: Yeah, he was— initially he had a Four-F classification, and then he got a farm classification so that they wouldn’t draft him to keep operatin’ the farm.

Rosa: So, okay, so he was exempted?

Joe: He was exempted, he never got drafted.

Rosa: Because he own— he could prove that he owned a farm…

Joe: Because he was runnin’ the farm. Specially once I went in, he was left [40:00] with the cows and the chickens and that and so… and the government knew that the couldn’t— they had to have— to keep some of the farms running, so most all the farmers uh… were exempt, at least one or two people in each family were exempt from the draft for— to keep growin’ food for the government, cuz they figured it was rationin’ for— of an awful lot of food that you weren’t
gonna get, just go to the store and get it. You had to have that little coupon… so… yeah… but… yes… Portland really was… didn’t change drastically after the war, but as more of these fellas came home, it was an incentive to buy houses and build that, so we did— it started to get more development and that, uh… and eventually this part of the country is too expensive land to be growin’ crops on, so, there’s no longer very many farms left anyplace around here… but…

Sam: How does it feel to have lived in one place pretty much for your entire life?

Joe: Mm-hmm, yeah, I have… I’ve— fact, I’ve lived in three houses. The brick house down there by the river, Beth’s house that she lives in down there by the river, the buildin’ out, over here that I uh built, and now in— upstairs here. Four houses, four places actually, in my total life, other than when travelin’ or that, so that I have… I’ve done quite a bit of travelin’, my wife loved to travel, and uh, so that if she was— had lived longer there’s no question there are other places I would have traveled to, but… We travelled to Italy a couple times. We’ve been to England, Ireland, Germany, uh… Bermuda, uh, that… so that uh… But I never found a place that I found was better for me than Portland… I guess uh, certainly, uh… Europe does not intrigue me at all. Italy there’s too many cars. We think there’s cars— traffic around here, but, go to Rome sometime! When you gotta spend two hours to get from downtown Rome to the airport on a bus that only goes for fifteen miles or something.

Sam: We did, we went to Rome. Last summer we were in Rome together.

Rosa: Yeah, it’s the really super narrow streets with cars going 100 miles an hours.

Joe: But even the wide streets are— that are packed with cars… [incomprehensible]

Sam: So you really feel like Portland’s a part of you?

Joe: Oh yes, and uh… that’s… uh… certainly my wife wanted all the old things in Ireland to look at. I looked at castles, and kissed the Blarney Stone for her and a few other things, but I didn’t see anything in Ireland that intrigued me to wanna live there, ya know. I think there’s no question that London is a nice city, and London’s transportation system is better than New York’s transportation system to a great extent, and between their subways and their busses [45:00] and their busses really augment the subways tremendously in London. So if you want to go a short distance in London, there’s a bus gonna come every two or three minutes, where we’ve never developed that in this country, public transportation, in any of the cities.

Sam: Did you deal with public transportation in Portland at all when you were working for the town?

Joe: No, because there was there was never any… it was no way to get public transportation. Sure you have the elderly bus that goes— takes the people around, but as far as any public transportation— there was public transportation between Portland and Middletown when I was in high school. During the— and prior to that, in fact there was a trailer— a trolley car used to come up Main Street Middletown and come across the bridge and come up Main Street Portland all the way up to Gildersleeve, and I don’t know how often it ran, but I remember as a little kid
of havin’ my mother grab me by the back of the neck because the trolley was comin’, and get away from the road, but there was a trolley track all the way up Main Street in Portland and over the years I worked in a few places where we ran into the old tracks that were buried in the asphalt and that and pulled them out. But uh… so there was a little bit of public transportation back in the ‘20s and ‘30s in Middletown, and it came across the bridge up to Gildersleeve, and of course, back at that time there was enough manufacturing in Middletown between the [incomprehensible] and the [incomprehensible] stuff, uh, the breakline people, Russell Company, and Wilcox and Critton, the manufacturer of boat hardware, anchors and cleats and boats and stuff, so Middletown did have quite a bit of manufacturing at one time, uh… so that people from Portland would take the trolley to go to work and back, and from one end of Middletown to the other, and I really don’t know how far around the trolley went. It was… I was too little to know when it was runnin’, and by the time I got to know about it, I remember seein’ it but I don’t know what it was doin’… But uh… But as far as public transportation, I am in favor of it, I’ve been in favor of it from— I served on the Midstate Regional Planning Commission for, oh, at least twenty-five or thirty years, and we’ve been pushin’ for the railroad to—to be re-established to go to Hartford or up to Springfield or that, and of course they have to pick— fix it up now so Pratt and Whitney can ship engines up uh, freight up through Cromwell now, up to Hartford and ship their engines out instead of trucks. But, I think that a lot more could be done, but it needs a federal initiative to push it and make some exemptions and rules and so forth and what they have to do to get it, and it’s a sad case that so many of the right-of-ways that were around have been made into bike paths and made into— bike paths is okay because you can always take it back to a railroad if you need it, but there’s a lot of places where its no longer available, there’s too many buildings and stuff on it. And this, I think this busway that they’re talkin’ about from New Britain to Hartford is a practical thing. I think it would be better if it was rail than busses, but everybody seems to think—or I shouldn’t say everybody—but a lot of the people that are in control seem to think that people are more willin’ to ride a bus than they are a railroad, and I don’t really know, uh… I rode railroads from here to Florida and back a few times, and I’ll admit that it’s—it is slow. I’ve never rode a bus that far, that’s for sure. In fact I’ve been on a few tour busses ridin’ around Hawaii or someplace from one tourist destination or another and that, but as far as goin’ anyplace by bus in concerned, I’ve never gone any distance on a bus, so I uh, but trains—my brother just went out to California on a train, and uh. so that public transportation from my standpoint is better by train than it is by bus. Get the cars off the road, let the nuts drive around.

Rosa: Well you— so you said your wife liked to travel. Did she— had she lived in Portland her whole life?

Joe: Well, her adult life—after—she moved to Portland when she was probably eighteen, and uh… but she lived in Middletown prior to that so it wasn’t—a big move comin’ across the river, and uh… but, yes, she was a great reader, and if she got a book on the St. Lawrence seaway, and got far enough interested in it, Joe was likely to go the St. Lawrence seaway [laughs] sometime within the next year or two. And when she got a book on Ireland, and maybe two books on Ireland, Joe was gonna go to Ireland… so uh… but… that was… she… was very interested in old stuff and houses and these old castles and that stuff that I could do without, but I went to them.
Rosa: Does she have um—and and you also—do you still have relatives that live in this area?

Joe: Yeah, we have relatives that uh, although uh, mostly now its nieces, nephews, and cousins that—because the older people that were in the area are all died off, and uh, but, uh… I still have cousins and that in this general area around here… my kids are spread out… Tom lives over… the…near… in Putnam whatever it is there… the East part of the state, uh… my daughter the nun is over in Meriden, Rita’s up in Rochester area, so, the kids are…and…my oh, the eastern part of the state… two of my granddaughters…and uh—one’s down… uh…she’s down by Bridgeport, so that uh they’re spread out pretty well now, and uh… but my daughter still has two parties a year for the family, and Easter Sunday night they’ll be fifty to seventy five people in this room for supper. And Fourth of July there will probably be fifty to a hundred people at a picnic on the hill there, uh, on the Fourth of July. Both run by my youngest daughter, from Rochester area. [55:00] See, she’s decided she’s gonna keep—my wife always did it. My wife is—loved to have company, and that’s what this room was built for, and uh, so that we don’t—she, she could uh invite fifteen or twenty five people—I went to a funeral the other day for an aunt Flynn who used to work in town hall and her kids were tellin’ me how much her husband used to say that he couldn’t understand how my wife could do what she did, because Reg could invite fifteen or twenty people from the town hall for the supper, and put a roast beef dinner on here for them, and sit down and eat wit ‘em, and they went “Okay, how come she can make it work, that she could sit down and eat wit ‘em.” But uh she had a lot of confidence in her ability to get things straight ahead of time. And we always had some help in the buildin’ that people like Beth would come over and watch the stuff for her, and pick up the dirty dishes and things like that, but we would have—we just always had a party after the holiday party a coup—uh, I forget when it was… first part of January, it would be the first or second Saturday in January after Christmas, we would have—I used to hire a little band, we used to have fifty, seventy-five people for supper, party here, and uh, so that we were partyin’ people. But its just…I could bring home a salesman from work any time and I would call her up in town hall at Four O’clock and say I’m bringing in Dick Tie home for supper tonight, uh, we’ll be out in an hour, and I was pretty sure that when we got here she’d have somethin’ for us to eat. It might be meatloaf, or it might be ham, but there was somethin’ to eat. She liked to cook and she—but she liked to travel to, so…[laughs]

Rosa: Well it sounds like you have a lot of friends in Portland, and do you, like—so do you, you really feel like part of a community here?

Joe: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yes Portland and I get along pretty good together, so…I like…and actually I saw a big change in the size of the town in the thirty-seven years that I worked for them. There aren’t too many people that keep the same job for thirty-seven years, so that… But I was interested enough in it, and after I was there a few years, it c—I realize today that part of the reason that I could do so many things without getting’ into too much trouble was that the majority of politicians don’t want to get into discussions over things, so they would allow me to put a shoreline in or a water line on your street, and blame me for this destruction on your street and that, rather than to bring it up in a meetin’ and decide—vote for it and do a lotta—so as long as things were goin’ pretty smooth and people were just complainin’ a little bit, the politicians kept their hands off of it, and uh, so that…I really…think that probably half the water pipes that are in the ground in Portland and two thirds of the sewers, I installed, in my
thirty-seven years, because for one thing, there was so much of—of expansion of the town—there was so many new streets and that, in that period of time.

Sam: After the war, or during—

Joe: Yeah, see I—I went—I went to work in ’52, ’52 to ’88 uh, I worked, and I was part time before that, but not, uh, but from ’52 to ’88 uh, any water line or any sewer line. Any street light, any traffic light went through me. And it made it an interesting job, yep, so that.

Sam: Can you describe a couple of the most memorable moments you have from then?

Joe: No, uh, I think that one of the hardest jobs I had was to try to convince people when we were building sewers to vote in favor of put—buildin’ the sewers, and ap-appropriatin’—realizin’ because so many people had septic tanks and that, and they were faced with these big costs of hookin’ to the sewer, of charges that were—increases the costs of puttin’ the sewers in and that. But there were so many septic tank failures and so many storm sewers that were carryin’ sanitary sewage that it needed—I felt it needed to be done, and uh, so that the sewer authority would have a [incomprehensible] in that—in the—and they sewer—uh, chairman of the sewer commission would call a meetin’ to order and half the time after about six questions, he’d say, “I better ask Mr. Seiferman to get up here and answer this because I—I’m not familiar with that part of it.” And so, and that never liked, because, although I did prepare myself quite often, so that I could practice multiplying the different criterias, it—so that when somebody said they had a two family house and 150 foot of frontage and that the—they sewer assessment would call a meetin’ to order and half the time after about six questions, he’d say, “I better ask Mr. Seiferman to get up here and answer this because I—I’m not familiar with that part of it.” And so, and that never liked, because, although I did prepare myself quite often, so that I could practice multiplying the different criterias, it—so that when somebody said they had a two family house and 150 foot of frontage and that the—I could tell ‘em how much their sewer assessment was gonna be without getting the [incomprehensible] fill out to write it down, but…and today I don’t think I could do that, I don’t know. Your mind does not improve with age, that I guarantee you. But, but I don’t know…

Sam: Well could you—maybe could you talk a little bit about the, um, when the reserv—when the reservoir dried up and you had to—you mentioned how you had to pump the—

Joe: Oh, from the quarry?

Sam: Yeah.

Joe: Well that was uh, the reservoir was lowered too much accidentally. The opened a drain to clear out the bottom and forgot about ‘em, and they got down too low, and it was a very dry summer, so that, uh, they didn’t have enough water coming into the town so that people were getting’—got up in the mornin’ your toilet don’t flush, there was…

Rosa: Whoa

Joe: …very unpopular people, and at that time, uh, my father was still interested in politics and that, and so that the selectman at the time, uh, came to him and said that he thought he could get permission from the state health department to pump out of the small quarry hole, but he didn’t know where he could get a pump that was big enough to pump into this thing, and we had a big irrigation pump here, so, my father said, “Well, use my pump,” so, we took the pump
down the quarry, an’ hooked it up, uh, the pump out of the small quarry hole. The wat-water was
good enough to pump into the manes. We chlorinated it before we put it in, but uh, and that was
a unique situation tryin’ to put chlorine into a high pressure line that a pump is pumpin’ on, and
get any amount of control of how much you’re puttin’ in. But it did work, and, so that we
pumped for forty five days, twenty four hours a day, and either I was there or my brother was
there, twenty-four—all around the clock…

Rosa: Whoa

Joe: …for forty-five days, and by the end of the forty-five days we had had a couple rainstorms
and they was gettin’ water in the reservoir and we could shut down—the town toilets flushed on
reservoir water, but uh, so the town was smaller, and we can only pump probably 300 gallons a
minute, but it was enough to augment the reservoir. The re-reservoir was always on the line, that
time so that what—we—when we weren’t pumpin’ enough, they could use reservoir water
would come, so that uh, it was—it was just a case of augmentin’ the reservoir with 300 gallons a
minute, twenty four hours a day, to keep the town workin’, but uh…yeah. Portland, I was, uh,
when we built the dam that’s at the reservoir now, I got a lot of engineering knowledge from the
architects and engineers on it, because I was curious enough to know how to do it, and that if you
get an—a real good engineer, and you question what they’re doin’ or what they’re sayin’, they
will spend a lot of time teachin’ you why they do it, and how they do it, and I found that they
best way to learn, uh, if I wanted to find out how they figured the run-off from an area of that,
tell the engineer that you don’t agree with what he come up with, and he will show you in the
book where it says that this type of vegetation has this type of run-off, with this type of w-water,
and that, and the soils have to be this and have that, and uhhhh.

There’s a little bridge in Portland that I built, uh, because the engineer designed the dam
at the reservoir, when he was designin’ the dam, he was very fussy that the contractor was tyin’
the reinforcement rods together, he wanted it so they wouldn’t move, and so that their spacin’
was right on all the—that stuff…and…“What difference does it make if they’re six inches
apart or eight inches apart?” and he says that that “Makes a difference!” and he went and he
showed me how to calculate the size of the rod that you needed fr—by the strength of that, and
the thickness of the concrete you were gonna use, and what the pressures were on it, and how far
apart and how big the rods had to be, and h-how—that—you had to make all the little squares
and tie and make sure the rods were in those squares in order to get the concrete to s—adhere to
it and not break. And he spend a whole afternoon, and a little bit of another mornin’ showin’ me
how to figure that stuff and get it, that—and so a year or two later, we had a truck go through a
bridge, and I said “Gee, if we send that up to the state to get them to design a repair for this
bridge, its gonna be two or three weeks or a month before—we’re ever gonna get a design back from the highway
department. Let’s build it ourselves.” So I b—formed up two side walls and put some rods in it
and sent my highway foreman over and got a truckload of reinforcer rods and steel, and we
poured—put a form in there, a lot of plywood to hold it, and tied all the rods together, and the
bridge is still there today!

Rosa: Can you tell us where it is?

Joe: Hmm?
Rosa: Where is the bridge?

Joe: On Summer Street.

Rosa: Summer— okay— so how do we get there—

Joe: Near the bottom of Prospect Street. You wouldn’t even notice it because it’s paved right over today, there’s no end walls on the end of it or that. We got a catch basin on one end of it, and it’s a open brook comin’ down and runs into it from the other end. But its— goes under Summer Street at the bottom of Prospect Street. And uh, but… we uh, but, and… within three days or four days the concrete had hardened enough so I had traffic runnin’ across the bridge, the road was open!

Rosa: That’s great

Joe: And, but I wasn’t ever… nobody knew where the design came from! [laughs]…[-1:11:30]…[1:13:32]… But that street is a— is very important especially if there’s high water in Portland because they close the meadow road goin’ out past the fairgrounds and that there, and uh all the traffic gets de-detoured across there to Bartlett Street and around Summer— Prospect Street and around, so that it does have quite a bit of traffic on that street, and uh, but, that was one of my gambles [laughs]… yeah… see… but uh… Its interesting, uh, public works, because uh I used to get some of the water goin’ to the Connecticut River outta the surplant that did a better bacteria test than the water we were takin’ from the reservoir into the drinkin’ water system. If everything’s going good in a secondary treatment plant, your affluent that you send to the river can be drinkable. I wouldn’t drink it because I don’t know what other things are in it, but from a bacteria standpoint, and that, uh, it is clear, [1:15:00] and uh, and its clear water. I don’t say its as good as some of the bottled water you might buy, but its clear water, and uh, so that if you really work at it and control your air and that, keep the bugs eatin’ good, its, uh, you can come out with pretty clean water… but its interestin’ to see how some of those things— how ya— good— an’ how easy it is to get goofed up, but that uh makes the job interesting, yeah…

Rosa: Well its been, its been an hour and a quarter, so I think we should wrap things up, but um, yeah do you have anything else to add for today’s…

Joe: No, I don’t ha— no I don’t have anything to add because I don’t know what we’re tryin’ to do here, but, you people do what you wanna do with it, and you got a little information and, uh…[~1:16:00]…[1:17:25]

Rosa: Well, I’ll— I will say, I mean just to, if you wanna think about this, one question I do have is, I, I would like to hear what you think about the role of um local history and the role of like, or what it means to do an oral history, and if you think its valuable to preserve… things about Portland and— I don’t know, so ju— that’s very general, but it sounds like you’re involved in uh the Historical Society and local history, so, if you have any thoughts about that, we should— I would like to hear…
Joe: Yeah, I uh… Actually… I never was too much of a joiner in locally things, partially, once I went to work for the town, because uh if we would go to a dance from the VFW or the Knights of Columbus or some of them, or even if we’re goin’ out to supper quite often, Reg got to a point where she didn’t want to go to anything in Portland because people would us-used that occasion because, “There’s a tree limb by my front drive, and its blockin’ the sunshine, and the darn tree, the town should take that tree down!” and, or “That sh— [incomprehensible] stickin’ up [incomprehensible] in my front yard and I’ve complained about it for two years now and it hasn’t been fixed!” So that we probably were much more likely to be sociable that we invited than going, although we did go out al-a lot but we did go away from Portland a lot, that— I’m goin’ with Glenna from the Hawthorne and over there and the Berlin Turnpike this weekend, and Glenna sold her motel so that she’s goin’ as part of Riverdale to the New England Innkeeper’s Association, but uh… yeah, that’s uh, why… [1:20:00] now, within socially within Portland as far as organizations go, I was not very active, uh… I belonged to two or three of them but, paid the dues an’ that’s about as much as I— not a good member. The only one that I really [incomprehensible] was the Power Squadron.

Sam: What’s that?

Joe: It’s a boating organization that was— te-teaches boating primarily. They’re initially that was their object, was to educate the public to safe boating, and over the years they have become higher up commanders commanders and big shots and that stuff and not as much of the public… and when I was active in it, we gave free classes, in fact the projection screens and that in the closet there are because we had free classes here for navigation an’ for seamanship an’ for that… and it was all free. Today the Power Squadron wants to get paid for everything they do, and I don’t agree with that, I think that they could afford to still have free classes and that stuff. It would be much better organization. So that I’m not as active— I still go to the meetins once a month, but that’s because I like to eat, and there’s good food [laughs], but uh… yeah and in fact they still use this for classes every once in a while when they want to have classes, so… I wouldn’t be surprised if Beth has got some schedule here for sometime in the near future because we used to let ‘em use it for free. But now they wanna get paid for teachin’, and so that— that I don’t agree with. I think that that type of organization should be strictly voluntary.

Sam: Okay [1:22:45]
Rosa: Okay, well today is October twenty-ninth, this is Rosa McElheny and Sam Cohen of Wesleyan University talking to Joe Seiferman of Portland Connecticut and the time is, 12:41 p.m.

Joe: You need to keep track of the time huh? [chuckles]

Rosa: Well, for all our, our records, it helps to have…um, so, well actually, should we start with the photos?

Sam: yeah

Sam: We scanned all the photos

Joe: oh

Sam: Thank you very much for letting us use them

Rosa: Yeah those were really cool. And…

Joe: Well, as you can see, back in them days films were not too good, and you didn’t get most of the films were only eight pictures on a roll back them days

Rosa: uh-huh

Sam: was it, was it expensive?

Joe: it was expensive relative to the times. Probably roll of film was probably only two dollars, but two dollars—

Sam: back in them—

Joe: —back in them— the thirties was a lot of money. I don’t remember, uh, much about. I know that, that limited how many pictures I took a lot of times because I ran out of film and my father didn’t give me no money to go buy more.

Rosa: [chuckles]

Joe: So, yeah…

Rosa: So these are the images and some of them

Joe: Yeah
Rosa: are, we don’t know where they, so if you could—

Joe: yeah

Rosa: — kinda write a caption for each one what would you say?

Joe: Well, that was one of the cottages on the farm down by the river—

Rosa: okay

Joe: —and, uh, as you can see, the river got considerably higher before the flood was over than that picture shows—

Rosa: okay

Joe: —but, uh,

Rosa: Is this house— building still on the property?

Joe: Yes. It’s still down there next to Beth’s house. Yeah, it’s still there

Sam: It looks kind of askew. Did it se— did it— is that just the angle of the camera

Joe: I think it’s the angle of the picture more or less at that time. Today it definitely is in bad shape—

Sam: [chuckles]

Joe: —because we haven’t fixed it in years. Beth uses it for a chicken coop

Sam: [chuckles] — but it wasn’t damaged too bad during the flood

Joe: No, very few of the buildings, uh, that got flooded were damaged very much because the, the river flooded it so big area that it wasn’t a high current, except down if you went out in that area out there, then it was movin’ fast, but in the flood areas, the water wasn’t movin’ very fast. So it didn’t have pressure to damage. By the barns in tat picture, the barns stayed raised up and they turned a little bit, but they didn’t fall apart, or, to any great extent, although when it came back down they weren’t on their foundations so at that point in time, they tilted, and needed a lot of work down on them.

Rosa: Okay, well that was photo one, this is photo two…

Joe: Yeah—

Rosa: Also, at Riverdale?
Joe: Yeah, that’s Riverdale, that’s the brick house, in the picture, and, and this you can see the old barns there. And this one got would damaged enough before the next flood so that it wasn’t there in the next flood

Rosa: Whose boat is that, in that…?

Joe: My father’s… and see, the river is out there, the boat was just up there so that it’d be out of the current in the river [5:00] mm-hmm.

Rosa: This is photo twelve.

Joe: That’s the same brick house, and, the water’s up half-way on the windows downstairs, and it is pretty well, it came a couple feet higher before the crest of the flood in that picture is, but that was up at a point when probably my father and uh, figured that it was the top of the floods, so go get a picture, but it got higher than that.

Rosa: this is photo thirteen

Joe: Mm-hmmm, that’s lookin’ out across the meadows up there, and, uh, looking toward Middletown from, there…

Rosa: Is it taken from this property?

Joe: No, no, no, that was taken from up probably in the hills there, I’m not too sure…. Where it would be, the hill’s across the river there…we’re quite a ways off because it’s too many years ago that those pictures were taken for me to remember where I took them from, I’m lucky if I recognize…

Sam: You remember a remarkable amount.

Joe: Mm-hmm, but that’s uh… I’m not too sure where I took that one from, no,

Rosa: this is photo fourteen

Joe: yeah, that was down by the uh, old quarry buildings that were damaged in uh… I think that was after the flood had gone down, and but I’m not too sure, uh, I’m surprised that it looks as though there’s snow on the roof there, and that, that, there was any snow left after the ‘36 flood went down, but I think it is. But, uh,

Rosa: Allright, photo fifteen

Joe: Mmm…[incomprehensible]…that house… under that house is the one in Cromwell. Oh,

Sam: So you were taking photos in Cromwell, too, so you’d go all around
Joe: We went up to Cromwell because there was a house where...you know where uh 99 Restaurant is now, and Stop & Shop, over in Cromwell? Across, between Stop & Shop and 99, there's a car wash and, uh, ice cream store, in that in there in that triangle. Well back in the flood, uh, that, it was a farm on that triangle, that area there was no commercial stuff there, all, but that was, and a relative, cousin of my father's owned a farm, and we went on, went up to Hartford and across the river and came back down to see how his house got in the water, was up to the second story windows on the house, so that if we had a flood today, the same depth as the 36 flood was, then maybe the top of Stop & Shop's sign might show, but uh, the car wash and, uh, the 99 Restaurant, and the Dunkin Donuts and that along there would not show.

Rosa: Whoa

Joe: They would all be so far under water that it would be just be part of the lake.

Sam: [chuckles]

Joe: So that's, and that could be taken from over in there, but I'm not too sure, you see, because up where K-Mart is, is where we had to be, up on that hill, in order to take the pictures of the, that flood down in there.

Rosa: This is photo sixteen

Joe: Mmm...[incomprehensible]...

Rosa: Do you think this is in Portland?

Joe: Yeah, I think it's [10:00] down, uh, down by, uh...yeah... [incomprehensible] houses... no, I'm not too sure where it is, because there's nothing there that I'm sure of right now, of where, that...See a lot of that, at that time, I didn't know what I was taking pictures of to a certain extent, so that it was flawed and hey, look at them houses that are in the water, or them buildings—

Sam: Was it usually you who decided what you were taking pictures of, or did your father tell you—

Joe: No, well, some of it my father would take me places, and, I had his camera so I snapped my fingers a lot of time and, uh, I wouldn't, no, you figure, in '36 flood, I was only eleven years old, so, uh, I wasn't too conscious of who owned a lot of things, and that, and, uh, but, in that a lot of times it, it would be my father'd say Joe, go down there and take a picture of that” and, uh, so I would go. But I wouldn’t know what I was takin’ a picture of.

Rosa: Well, there are a lot of these, so

Joe: That’s right
Rosa: Maybe we should just, if you see one that you wanna have something to say about, stop me.

Joe: Yeah, yeah

Rosa: Um,

Joe: That’s it there so may [incomprehensible] just taking pictures of the, this area floods, some of it would be, most of it in Portland, and some in Cromwell, and there’s a few pictures that I took from Middletown looking back across the river, I remember taking a few pictures from there. But, uh, I think that that is down near where the quarry hole was. And the buildings, and, the water’s starting to go down by the time that was taken.

Rosa: That’s photo seventeen.

Joe: Mm-hm.

Rosa: Oh, who is that in the boat?

Joe: Well, it’s could be one of the hired hands, but I would expect it might be my brother, or me. We would flo-float, rowin’ around there a lot, in the flood area. And that, that was before the height of the water because, uh, the barn is still in stable at that point in time. And, uh, the doors are closed on the barn again, so that we’d taken the hay out as much as we could get of it. And that’s the— that’s the, this farm barn and that is not there any longer because we tore it down it was damaged in the 36 and 38 both, and we, he, fixed it after the ‘36, but after ‘38, he decided to build a new barn for the cows and not spend too much more than that, so eventually they got tore down completely. But…

Rosa: That was photo eighteen.

Joe: Mm-hmm… ok… that, that is the same barn and that has to be the ‘36 flood because this building went before the flood was over.

Rosa: Photo twenty.

Joe: And that’s…down by the [15:00] by the quarries I’m pretty sure, and that’s another of the cottages down on the farm here, down by the river, down, by the… but that one was high, it used to have a garage under it that and that little spot under the porch that is sticking out, and uh, the and that was close to the height of the flood. That, and…but the roads that went down there, down in here, so that, uh, had to crawl along the hillside to get that picture.

Rosa: That’s photo twenty-five.

Joe: Mm-hmm… yeah, that’s in the ‘36 flood and that’s when it’s goin’ down because you see the dark on, just the top the windows on down stairs, yes that was the height of the water, the
bricks soaked up the water, so that when the flood went down, the red line, straight line on the building, as to where the height of the flood was.

Rosa: And this is the same brick house.

Joe: That’s the brick house that’s on the, here. That’s the main house. Yup. And that’s a coast guard cutter that was protectin’ the bridge, and it was stationed there by the railroad bridge so that if any oil tanks got loose, and, to flow down the river, they were there to blow em up. And that was their job, to stay there and watch out for any big tanks, or that that would come, and that would take the bridges down, cuz they didn’t want to lose the railroad bridge. So that, uh… in ’36 the highway bridge was definitely under water, but it was also want, they didn’t want it to fall down, so, uh, that coast guard cutter stayed there at the height of the flood, or just before the height of the flood, when it was, with its big gun on the front of it to blow up any tanks that came down.

Rosa: And this is Middletown, here?

Joe: That’s Middletown, yeah… yeah, surprised that, that’s right, it’s too far down, I would say you should be able to see St. John’s Church, but you can’t because it would be behind the bridge, here. Uh…

Rosa: Photo twenty-seven.

Joe: Uh… [incomprehensible]… that’s here, again, the flood, yeah…

Rosa: Photo thirty-two

Joe: Uh… mm-hmm,

Rosa: Can you tell me about that building?

Joe: I think that’s a maintenance building that the state had down under the bridge to Middletown. Uh… pretty sure that was that big garage that was down there.

Rosa: Photo thirty-three.

Joe: Uh…. This is uh, toward the height of the flood here, this is that three-car garage that’s still down there, but the height of the flood, there’s a pin in the garage right about there, that, the coast guard put in, when they were, for the measure the height of the flood. And it, that’s part of the through the oars for the rowboat that we’re usin’ to get around it. I’m not too sure where those three houses are. Cause I don’t recognize that fence, but, and that was the Rivington Ram factory, that, my aunt worked there, that was one of the reasons that we had to get a picture of where she worked.

Rosa: Well this photo actually, on the back of it, it has the, it, it’s like, printed like a postcard.
Joe: Yeah, it was put out as a post card. Yeah, that was a postcard.

Rosa: But you took the photo—

Joe: But I took the, I, not too sure whether it was my photo or not. I know I took pictures of it at the time, but I’m not too sure whether that picture was one of the ones that they used to make the postcard, see, my father and mother made postcards up and sold them in the restaurant [20:00] In fact, uh, there still old postcards in this place over in the office, that we give to people, so that they always had a postcard of something around here – the river, uh, right now, it shows these buildings, uh…[incomprehensible]… because people want to send, and we want the publicity, and that I’m not too sure whether it was our photos that they had made up or whether because it was a novelty picture to show the factory in the water. And this I’m pretty sure is taken from over in Middletown. And you see the bridge and the oil tanks in Portland are, you can see em through the bridge.

Rosa: Were you in a boat, do you think, when you took this?

Joe: No, I don’t think so, I think we were on some high land or something back here, or something that I could get out on. I might have been, but I’m not too sure…It’s uh [incomprehensible]… and we’re not the height of the flood, but it was the boats before the flood got up, before we had a move em all…[incomprehensible]…that’s early in the flood, when some of the ice was still comin’ down the river. You see, and those, are,

Rosa: That’s photo four

Joe: Because… Oh yes, that’s the farm down here, that’s the same one that I show you, it had the garage under it, and then this is the one down here that you see the water’s right up in it and that

Rosa: Yeah

Joe: See… and, then, uh… down that same area, with the debris and that, that was floatin’ around… [incomprehensible]…

Rosa: Oh

Joe: That’s my brother or I, one of us, in the boat, so, if I took the picture, it’s probably him [chuckles].

Rosa: That’s photo seven.

Joe: Yeah… That little shack there, went down the river before the flood was over. That belonged to the coast guard. And they stored kerosene in it back before they had batteries and these electric lights on the lighthouses. My father had the contract to fill the lanterns on two of the lighthouses around here. They coast guard used to bring the glasses for the lights so, because they had broke every once in a while, and kerosene, for the lanterns. And, uh, he used to go once every— I guess he was supposed to go every day, but I think he only went once every second or
third day, and filled the kerosene and cleaned the globes on the, on the light, lanterns so that they were lit.

Rosa: Where were the lighthouses?

Joe: Huh?

Rosa: Where were the lighthouses?

Joe: Well Bobkin Right Light is up, uh… across from the new power plant that they’re building over there, and Paper Rock is down here, uh… just below where the power lines cross this road up here, past Axelrod’s, [incomprehensible] there’s a, if you look, from Axelrod’s and you got that storage place, and the Citgo station, and then there’s the…uh… natural gas pumping station, and just past the natural gas pumpin’ station, you see a driveway that goes in, down into the woods, and that goes down to that little lighthouse. And so, one was on each side of us, here, and I know in the wintertime, even when I was maybe five or six, the river would freeze and my father would go up with the horse on the ice to take care of the lighthouses. Rather than walk through the woods—

Rosa: Uh-huh

Joe: Or that. Because the horse ridin’ pretty good on the ice.

Rosa: That was photo eight.

Joe: Mm-hmm. That’s just another picture of the floods in the barns.

Rosa: Oh, yeah…

Joe: I think… I think that’s downtown Portland, but I’m not too sure, lower Main St in Portland, but I’m not too sure which. It’s people, and houses flooded down oh… [incomprehensible] be something to look at, but I’m not too sure now. [25:00] That’s a problem that we all have taking pictures and not labeling them.

Sam: [chuckles]

Joe: And, my brother just had a whole books, five books or something, of pictures he took. He, he just came back from California, and, visitin’ his daughter out in Idaho and that, and he had oddles of stuff on, digital stuff, and he sent it to Kodak, and labeled it all, for Kodak, they put it in beautiful books for him. I don’t know how much it’s gonna cost him, probably as much as his trip cost, but [chuckles] that was it. So, mm-hmm…

Rosa: Okay, cool

Joe: It’ll show up.
Rosa: Yeah

Joe: Yeah, and so I’m thinking about doin’ some of them books now, because it would be a way of havin’ stuff that my kids might know what some of the pictures are of, that we take today, because

Sam: Have you shown those photos to your children?

Joe: These?

Sam: Yeah

Joe: Oh, They’ve probably gone through em. Yeah

Sam: Have you talked with your children a lot about your experiences as a child, about some of the things we’ve been talking about.

Joe: Well, the probably were in a lot of conversations over the years [chuckles]. Uh…my son is interested in a lot of the mechanical stuff of what we did, and what…and, uh… uh… actually, he’s, uh… workin’ in engineering but never outside, always factory-type stuff. He’s a, I don’t know what, some kind of an engineer. He got through Worcester tech, and he, and they give him some certificate that he could apply with [chuckles], and, uh… but, uh, and, Rita is my youngest one, she’s more interested in this place and things like that. But she lives up in Rochester, and works for Kodak, so, uh, and, she’s, she primarily been in the medical, uh, design industry, design, she did a, a CT Scan machine for Kodak that they sold, to the rites to, to down Texas, and she almost had to go to Texas with the machine and Kodak, so that, be careful what you do, you get to work for one of these companies, and they well the product that you made, and they sell you along with it, so [laughs]

Rosa: Do you feel that raising a family in this town changed your perspective on Portland the place?

Joe: No, I don’t think so. I, uh, I think that I was brought up in a wide spectrum of the town, havin’ my father as selectman so long, and that, and as postmaster, and then for me working for the town, so that the town I watched it grow and that, and, every once in a while they’d do something today, and I’d say but if I was still boss they wouldn’t do that [laughs] but…

Rosa: Actually, that was a question I had for you, um, which was, just that, um, you talked about how you wanted to, you were trying to get a railroad put in, put back in, from here to Hartford, and them...

Joe: Yes

Rosa: Springfield? Do you have other things that you wish Portland would do… do you now?
Joe: Not really, uh… I think that, uh, Portland should keep the reservoir, and eventually [30:00]
And so, from Hartford they should have used their own water supply rather… but at the time it
was easier for the selectman, when he needed more water, to hook up to Hartford, and the sad
part of it is, is that I made it easier for them to do it… uh, in the later years of my workin’…
because I didn’t intend to buy from Hartford. I thought we might want to sell to Hartford some
day, because I was developin’ well fields, and, uh, when Paley Farms the subdivision was built
up to Glastonbury road almost, almost up to Glastonbury there, they proposed a six-inch water
main to supply it with water. And, I gave em some concessions and what they could do in
building the roads, and crushin’ their own stones and stuff like that, and usin’ it on the roads and
that, if they would put a twelve-inch water main up there, which they did. But had I not put that
twelve-inch main up there at that time, because it’s goes to it in half, quarter of a mile of
Glastonbury, so, it would have been a real expensive proposition for Portland to hook up to
Glastonbury for water. But because that twelve-inch line was in there, it was fairly simple just to
make a little short run up in Glastonbury to connect to it, and the water goes the opposite way in
it now. Instead of goi’n from Portland up there, it goes from Glastonbury down here. But, it was
my fault. I should have let em put the six-inch in, they water probably would never have got
through the cost of hookin’—

Sam: At the time, what did you say you were developing, you were developing what?

Joe: Paley Farms is, a, uh, a subdivision that was built up there, on the North End of Portland.
It’s quite a few houses in there, and four or five streets in there… and the… when I was director
of public works, any of those roads and, and water lines, and where the fire hydrants went, and
that type of stuff was all my own case. So I got em to put that twelve-inch line up there at the
time because I felt that a six-inch line that distance would not give fire protection to the houses
they were building, and they were all goin’ up in the hundred thousand dollar houses, which at
that time was a lot of money. So… I talked em into putting the twelve-inch line up, which cost
them a lot more money, but back in 1980, it wasn’t, uh, as bad as it would be today, and, but in
order to get em to do it, uh, with the town engineer and myself, that, if he wanted to crush his
own, see he had a lot of rock up there that was, had to move, and if he wanted to crush the rock,
and stuff, that we would accept it for the trap rock for the base under the roads, and that stuff,
which was gonna save him a lot of money, instead of havin’ to buy trap rock from DeMaso, or
Yorkhill, or somebody. He could get a crusher up there and crush it, and use his own stone. And
we felt that his stone was good enough so that it would suffice, but it wou— it was a lot easier
for him to do it that way. But that saved him a lot, but it cost him a lot for the water lines, so
we… [incomprehensible]…it was a trade off, that. And, I was willin’ to do those kind of things
and th— at that time, uh… I didn’t have much supervision from the town of what I did. So I
could get to do those things, make those agreements, that worked out.

Rosa: Has that changed since your reti— you know, since your retirement?

Joe: They have gone away from expansion since I left there’d been very little expansion,
subdivisions in Portland, and… they really stopped doin’ a lot of work with, the fellas that
worked for me, some of them have retired now. [35:00] But they were the… too because they
sold off, didn’t replace the backhoes, and some of the mach— equipment and so forth, and they
didn’t do these water line jobs and sewer jobs, and storm-sewer work and that. Which is much
more interesting work than sweepin’ the road, pickin’ up leaves, uh, which the to— the highway crew spent so much of their time with today. It was much more interesting to install pipes, and dig ditches, and, uh, run equipment, and that. So I think that… But, the fellas, the second guy is a—the first fella that replaced me, he didn’t have the knowledge to do much, it was on his own, and I think Jeff Galcier, the one that’s here now, uh, he’s a land surveyor, he can tell you exactly where very boundary line is, but he doesn’t have the courage to go ahead and design a pipeline or something, and wanna be responsible for it. He wants to give it to you to design, and to a contractor to build. And there isn’t the money around to do those jobs, so nothing goin’ forward much right now. He been talking about replacing a water line on High Street for five, six, eight years now, it still has gotten in to doin’ it. They’ve a lot of surveying, they’ve done test points, and that, but there’s nothing been done. I don’t think it needs to be done. I think that I could repair that line, that one that’s there, uh, and that I did repair the other side of the hill. Uh, goin’ up Bartlett Street to High, to the tanks on High Street, that line gave me trouble when I was still workin’. And I put a couple more valves in it, and put a lot of expansion joints in, so hat the pipe, the pipe comin’ down the hill like this, when the water changes temperature, the pipe, if it gets warm, the pipe expands, and what happens on those steep grades is, it expands but it don’t push it back up the hill, that’s the hard way for the expansion to happen, it pushes it down the hill. Then when it contracts the next time, it doesn’t bring this one down the hill, this one just pulls away a little further, so that eventually they get to where it opens up. And you get a leak.

Joe: And they have to cut out piece and put something in. On the other side of the hill when that first started. That started earlier because the temperature change affected it more, because what the temperature change primarily was is when I use reservoir water, it was warm water, and when I used the wells, it was cold water from the ground. So I learned after a cou— a year or two of that expansion and contraction and that, Don’t change from one to the other as often as you’re doin it. And, that and trying, but I also realized that I had to do something about the pipes so you could change. And I think it was they don’t think they’ve had any real breaks on that side, they had one a year or two ago, but not very many on that side. But on the outward side, the twelve-inch line comin’, or ten-inch comin’ down the hill, they’ve, are still havin’ trouble with it, and, but they’re not putting in expansion joints when it does go, and they haven’t put in additional valves, so that when it breaks they can’t shut off a little section of it, they got long pieces between areas that you shut down, and when you shut a long area off, you got a lot more people holler about “my shower” I can’t… or I’m doin my dishes, or I’m getting dirty water in my laundry!” So the fewer people you shut off, the better off you are. And that’s what I think it could be fixed today, and not spend the money to put a new line, but [40:00] that isn’t I don’t have to worry about it anymore, other than pay the taxes on this place... Taxes are a major concern to me.

[Rosa and Sam laugh]

Joe: Yes.

Rosa: Do you feel proud of the work you did as director of public works?
Joe: Oh yeah, I feel that uh… I have probably put in two-thirds of the sewers that are in Portland today were installed under my administration. And probably close to half the water. So that, and quite a few of the roads have been upgraded, and probably eight percent of the storm drains that they have in the town today I installed. So that… but I was there for a long time. Thirty seven years.

Rosa: Did you have to get, you’d worked in construction beforehand

Joe: Mm-hmm

Rosa: But did you have specific training once you got on the job?

Joe: No. Not to any extent, uh, I got into construction strictly in that workin’ around the farm and that I knew how to drive a truck, and the first job that I got in construction was drivin’ a truck. But it was fellas that I had gone to school with, and I knew well, that were sellin’ the operators to the bulldozers, the backhoes and so forth, so that when I’d go out on a job with them, lot of times I’d get on the machine and play with it when we weren’t doin’ anything till I got to learn new, and I think the best gift I had was vision. My depth perception was very good. Uh… when I poured concrete on this power plant across the river here, I was runnin’ the Merino crane with a hundred and twenty foot boom, with a thirty foot jib on top of it, which meant it would down and thirty foot out. So that meant that the hook that I was droppin down and that stuff was 150 feet away from me. And I could take one of them big concrete buckets and line it up over a form that was only a foot wide, a hundred and fifty feet away from me, and get the concrete to fall in that form, a hundred and fifty feet away from me, which, granted, sometimes the guys’d tell me this, or go to that, but your depth perception, and when I dug, if I were diggin’ a water line or sewer line, or that, the backhoe, I could grade the bottom of that ditch to within two or three inches, or four inches of what I was supposed to be carryin’ for a grade down there, so that the fellas that did the hand-laying of the pipe and that didn’t have to do any diggin’, or that, I could stay within about that much, lookin’ from the seat of a machine down into a ditch that was ten, twelve foot deep, and carry a level… and I don’t have the depth perception today, although it’s still pretty good. Uh… I could tell whether somethin’s level or not. But I think that was my, one of my biggest advantages in construction, that I did have such good depth perception. I certainly improved it when I went in the Marine Corps, with the, uh… tests for, uh… or some of the jobs were they had, a unique way of testing depth perception, they’re like, uh, a bowlin’ alley with your duck pins down the far end, but each one was on a pulley, and they would tell you that to put em all straight across. And they had a camera on em they could see over the head, and they could see whether you could look down there and line up the five pins straight across, and then they tell you, “bring em up here, and put these two opposite each other, down a foot, and put these three opposite each other two foot further down, and make a V out of it,” and I didn’t, didn’t realize at the time, but there was very few people that could do that. That they would get ‘em close, but not [45:00] good. But I could, that’s the first time I realized that my depth perception was pretty good. And, uh, but that is strictly not anything that you learn, it’s just luck.

Rosa: Well you talk a lot about, um, your children and their, their going to college, and their training. And you didn’t go to college.
Joe: No.

Rosa: Do you think your life would’ve… I mean how do you feel about that, do you have…?

Joe: Well, I think that, uh… had I gone to college I probably would’ve been definitely in a different career, because I probably would’ve got interested in something else. Uh… there was no question I wanted my kids to go to college because I realized how many things that I didn’t know. I also found that if you can listen good, you can learn an awful lot by questioning engineers, architects, and that. I got an awful lot of education by telling engineers that I didn’t think he was right. And, and an engineer will sit down and spend a lot of time with you showing you, and provin’ especially when I was in the position of workin’ with em. Uh, why they were right, and, uh, so that really, I think I was fortunate in that I was exposed to people who were willin’ to teach me a lot. Uh… But oh, there’s no question that I don’t know what I would’ve done because I have no idea what interests I would’ve got. I was more pushed by different factors that brought about… I probably woulda stayed in construction had I not had Tom Bourne and my wife getting so mad because I came home so late from construction nights, and got up and left so early in the morning that, uh… that brought me b-back to a realization that construction really wasn’t the best thing for our— our relationship in general and that, uh, she didn’t like that idea of bein’ home all alone all the time with a kid, and… so that I believe that that, uh, is primarily wh-what got me out of construction partially, that I was… and I was fortunate to get the chance to go to work for the town. And, uh, I enjoyed that, too. But there, uh… The daughter that’s a nun is close to a professional student. Rob had one daughter that’s a professional student, the one he just went to California— or out to Idaho to see. She was, uh… a professional student. She went to, uh… St. Anselms up in Rochester area, graduated from there, and then went to Texas or Arizona… Tex— uh… out there, she, got the idea that she wanted to teach deaf and dumb stuff, and she went out there for a couple years, uh… and, uh… she got, to where she could teach some and then she went to, uh, Un-uuh, Idaho, [incomprehensible] uh… work for the state of Idaho, or went to Idaho state for a year or two, and uh, so that he had her in college for a long time. He, I think he probably surpassed me with her. Dot between— Dot didn’t stay too long. [50:00] On, well, between St. Anselms, Boston University or Boston College, something like that, and UCONN, only had three colleges for her [chuckles] But, I think they all worked out well in colleges, uh, Rita probably has made the most money, as her college from RIT and Kodak and that, uh… but Tom’s done okay. But he moved from one company to another a couple of times, and never any big raises or boosts or anything, but he stays interested in this burnin’ up computers now. That’s in fact, tomorrow night I’m goin’ to meet them for supper because today is my birthday, you see, so, I’m gonna meet the kids tomorrow night for supper.

Rosa: [chuckles] My goodness, happy birthday

Sam: [smiling] Happy Birthday, eighty-four right?

Joe: Eighty-four today.

Sam: That’s exciting.
Joe: That’s, uh… oh yes, so, but as far as work goes, I was very happy with the town. But…

Sam: Well I had a question about some more recent town history. When the, um, the quarries were designated as a national landmark, do you remember what your, your reaction was, if you got anything about it or if the town had a big reaction?

Joe: I don’t think that as far as I was concerned, it was just one more of these designations that, uh, really don’t to an awful lot. Uh… I have traveled a lot, and stopped at some of those monuments around the countryside. I never felt that, uh, they were… it probably does preserve some of them from, because they’re a national monument or, a national landmark, or there a this or… that… it’s, uh… I don’t particularly agree with these, uh… historic zones within a town. I think if somebody wants to repair a house or change their house, they should be able to do it. I— just because somebody else thinks it’s a historic house that they shouldn’t have to live historically. They should be able to modernize and take care of it. But, that’s strictly my feeling that many of those type of designations, historic districts within towns and that stuff, really infringe an awful lot, on other people’s use of their property and that. In order to make something what somebody, and not everybody, thinks is beautiful, or is worth savin’. Uh… so that I’m not, a historic inclined person as far as… especially when it comes down to… I have no objection to open space purchases by the state or the town, that… If you wanna buy a house and keep it the way it is, beautiful. But I don’t think that you should be able to tell him that he cannot add a porch on, and he’s gotta get his, your permission what color he paints his house, because it’s in the historic district and so, it’s gotta blend. That to me is a big infringement on our civil rights of doin’ things for ourselves.

Sam: So you say that you think that designations, they can help preserve different landmarks, or maybe, they could help preserve natural spaces. What do you think is the value of preserving, of preserving either natural landmarks or industry, like the quarries, or, even, or, a home. Is there any value to it?

Joe: I don’t think there is, and, uh… Of all of the historic landmarks that I’ve been to, I haven’t found one yet that I thought was more valuable because it was a historic landmark. Uh… And The ones that, the things that I appreciate or have enjoyed and… like the presidential libraries. The most interesting one to me was Truman’s because there’s a lot of paper work in there of the Second World War, which I was involved with to a certain extent, and his decisions to use the atomic bomb, and what pressures he had, and that. Uh… Roosevelt’s up in New York, is an interesting one, but there again, it was, uh… bringing through the end of The Depression and that, and what the historic papers and things that you can read and them, are educational and to me, very interesting. Uh… why things happened is always gets my curiosity up. So that, uh, that would be one of the things that, and I found that, uh… Reg and I visited a lot of those like Washington’s, south in, down through the south, two or three of them old Presidents and generals and so forth, that their estates or their homes, and so forth, and I found most of them interesting, not only for the old kitchen ware, and things that were there, but from… able to see why some of the things that happened happened. They were, uh… but to take these historic districts and stuff like that and tell you you can’t do this to your house because… I’m very much against that. I think that if you buy your house you ought to be able to do what you want with it.
Rosa: What do you think the best way of preserving the history of Portland, or sort of local history is? Do you think it’s working here, or…

Joe: Well, see, basically right now, Portland isn’t preserving much of anything. The quarries, if it wasn’t for this fellas that are workin’ it as a playground, the quarries would be completely in disrepair. It’d be nothing down there. So that, but, it’s certainly isn’t makin’ them look like a quarry or anything. It was a big hole in the ground, there’s two or three more, well, it’s one of the quarries, the Feldspar quarry up there that’s a golf course now, that, uh… sure, one of the deep holes is a well, that’s a, supplies the water for the sprinkler system for the lawns, and the other one is just flooded up and let sit, full of water. Uh… but there’s no reason to preserve them as far as I’m concerned. If somebody finds a use for one of them, I don’t think there’s any historic value to them. That, uh… That people are gonna be amazed that in the future, that the big hole in the ground that they took feldspar out of, uh… There’s a couple cobalt mines over in Cobalt, that’s where Cobalt got its name, from Cobalt the min— the basic material cobalt. That was Cobalt, is one of the areas in the country that you could get the mineral cobalt out of. Uh… but, other than for the name Cobalt, there’s nothing to preserve. A hole in the ground. Uh… so that, no I don’t know about any, uh… good reason. I can see where the federal government, when you look at Yellowstone Park, or, the— the Grand Canyon, something like that. That was a, a good idea to… but, it, the government bought it and preserved it. It isn’t taken somebody’s private property, and sayin’ that you can’t do, with it. And the government’s had enough trouble running most of those areas now that I’m glad that I don’t have to make decisions on em because, uh… there’s always two ways of these things, introducing the bears, and, uh, coyotes and that back to those areas, uh, you can’t do it precisely because you give em too many bears and there’s gonna be no small animals left, and that isn’t the natural, so you, but how do you get the right mixture? I don’t wanna have nothing to do with that

Rosa: Well, do you, it sounds like you’re, you’ve been pretty involved in, I mean, at least, you did the event at the grange hall, and you agreed to talk to us about your life in Portland. Um, do you think it’s important to preserve it— maybe not necessarily buildings or places, but the, I don’t know, the information, or the history of a town?

Joe: Well, yes, I-I think that things like the Portland Historical Society collecting and preserving some of this, uh, especially, if you can do it with pictures and… so that, my grand children and great-grandchildren can see what the quarry looked like, or, uh, as… I enjoyed the, the farm exhibit, that we had up at the thing. Uh, I enjoyed it before that up there. And I’ll probably go again. I joined it only to help support it. I never intended to do much work for them, but I figured that I would, I would, I felt it was a worthwhile thing, to pay your dues and join it. And, uh, so that… but around here, there is nothing that I really say that I would not let somebody use, or, get rid of, if there was a reason for it, because I don’t think that there’s anything I want to preserve for the future generations, but, as far as the historical society goes, I’m— I like their system, I like the way they do it, and I’ll contribute to it. That’s how… uh, I got involved the other night [chuckles] Tuesday night, and, talking about farms, and, uh… I got some information the other night from, uh, people that were— people— people that are dead mostly, that I didn’t know whether they were alive or dead, I knew I hadn’t seen them in many years, and some of them are alive and some of them are dead, but they’re not around here, and that’s why I haven’t seen em.
Sam: Mm-hmm.

Joe: but, uh, I wouldn’t have been involved with the, their meeting the other night, if I could’ve, figured a good excuse not to [laughs] but, uh… I feel that some of us have to get involved in order to keep the general interest in those things. There’s probably enough people that were there the other night, that now, are willing to help with the historical society or something that would give the historical society something because they know that the historical society gathers all that information about the farms. And, uh, so that… yeah… Are you gonna be a historian when you get out? [chuckles]

Rosa: Well, I don’t know, I mean, did it— what did you— what was your impression, I think we just called you on the phone the first time and said, we’re doing this project and would you agree to be interviewed, and did you have any— how did you feel about the proposition of participating in…

Joe: Well, uh, I basically feel that, uh, in that I don’t have any real things that are, uh… that if I can talk to you, or answer questions of what I think, uh… that I should because, uh… you… I should let you know how I feel so that you can see where things are, came from, and that, uh, easier, if you’ve meet the people and, uh, I certainly would never volunteer to go to that farm thing the other night, but, when they asked me to come up, yeah, I’ll come up, and, uh, answer questions about Riverdale, and the rest of the farms in Portland, but, uh… one of the things that they brought up the other night up there is that I started drivin’ schoolbusses in the town of Portland when I was sixteen years old.

Sam and Rosa: [laugh]

Joe: I got a, my father got the superintendent of schools to change my schedule in high school around so that I had seventh period every day as a study hall.

Sam: [laughs]

Joe: And that meant, in seventh period I didn’t have to go to study hall, I could go get the bus, and take the school bus, and go pick up the grammar school kids, and by the, by the time I left for study hall, got out of the school, went down the street and got the bus, drove around to the grammar school, picked up the grammar school kids for my route, came back down to the high school, the high school was out, and I picked up the high school students then, and then delivered out to the woods here, home, and that was brought about by the second world war. Because when the, uh… here’s the two school bus owners lost their drivers to the draft, and they had two choices: eighty year old men, or sixteen year old boys. [chuckles] So both of them went to boys, and I think initially they had to put up another insurance policy with the state in order to get us the licenses to drive school bus, but, uh… so that when I was, oh let’s see, sophomore, yeah, I think my sophomore year I started drivin’ school bus, and…

Rosa: Well, do you, you talk, you were just talking about, um, feeling like if someone asked you to participate and, uh… local history project, you would have to, you know, you would say, you
would agree to it because you think it’s important. Do you feel a stronger sense of that commitment as you get older, and as you…

Joe: Oh, I, think I’ve learned from you people. Uh… it’s interesting to me to see where your interests are, in what we discuss is not that I can remember everything, but it, it, I’m interested in it, it surprises me that you spend so much time on this type of work, but uh… you’re, it’s interesting to me to see that this is part of, in that I never was educated, [1:10:00] formally, that way. Is to see the things that you do in that, is in— definitely interesting, its worthwhile, its worth my time to see what’s goin’ on in the world. [chuckles] I’m interested in what goes on in the world [laughs] yum. [incomprehensible]. I’ll bet you ten years from now you won’t remember it, but you’ll be glad you got your education [all laugh]

Rosa: Well this, this is an interesting— the class, it, it’s an English class.

Joe: It’s an English class

Rosa: Yeah, about oral— the title is oral narratives, so it’s about, really about storytelling, but it’s also in the department called the service learning department, which is like, a, sort of an interdisciplinary sector of the university that has in all the classes there do something, have coursework that applies outside of, off campus, and you talk, you you know interact with…

Sam: Interact with the community, and learn, and that’s a very valuable part of education also. It’s the kind of education that you had plenty of, but it’s an education that you don’t just get sitting in front of a lecture.

Joe: Some fella up there at the meetin’ the other night, said to me, that some professor at Wesleyan is gonna have some of the kids do a program for the historical society about something their collecting or doin’, and I have no idea who the professor was, or what— what it, he said that, they, they were gonna probably gonna have it at a meetin’ in the next couple of months

Rosa: That’s probably our class, yeah…

Sam: I don’t know if we told you, there’ll be a presentation at the – [cuts out]