

Sylvia Willard Transcript

Ann Buffum: Okay, we can start.

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum meeting with Sylvia Willard to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is June 29, 2005, and we are at Sylvia's home on Jefferson Street in Rutland, Vermont. Sylvia, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

Sylvia Willard: Yes, go ahead.

SG: Okay, good. We based these questions on the form that you filled out. I'm going to ask some things of you. If you need to take a break or you want to add anything else, you just go ahead. Sylvia, do you know where and when your Jewish ancestors came to the United States and where they first settled?

SW: No idea at all. No idea.

SG: What brought them? I was looking on the sheet, and both parents were born in –

SW: My parents were born in the United States. My parents were born in this country. Daddy was born in Middlebury, and mama was born in Adams, Mass, in that area. That's where Mommy grew up, and Daddy grew up.

SG: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

SW: My mother grew up in Adams, Mass, more or less. My father grew up in Middlebury, more or less.

SG: What brought them to that area?

SW: No idea. I don't know anything about the history.

SG: When did your folks move to Brandon, Vermont?

SW: Well, my folks didn't exactly move there as far as I know. Daddy started the store. My father started the store. I was in high school [inaudible]. I remember when my father had the store down by the station before we moved up to Main Street. I was just a little girl then playing around. It wasn't until I got to high school – I think my father bought the store or started going into business and moved it up to Main Street.

SG: Was his store originally down near the tracks in Brandon?

SW: It must have been. I think that came about before I was married [inaudible].

Ann Buffum: Do you have any other memories of growing up when you were a little girl that you could tell us about?

SW: We were down near the station. My father had a store. I used to love to roller skate. Of course, the station across the street, the railroad station – had a cement floor, cement tiles. My girlfriend and I would go over to the – it must have driven them crazy – kerplunk, kerplunk, kerplunk. They never said anything to us. [inaudible] big hill – Union Street Hill. We'd skate down that. Roller skates, to me, were like walking. Oh, I roller-skated. I loved to roller skate.

SG: When your father moved the business, was it always called Shapiro's?

SW: My daddy was [inaudible].

SG: You can talk. It's okay.

Evelyn Sutnick: No, you told me not to [inaudible]

SG: [inaudible]

SW: Keep on the subject.

SG: Keep on the subject. We're fine.

ES: I don't want to interrupt.

SW: No, you're not interfering if I ask you. [Recording paused.]

SG: I was going to ask Evelyn a question. Evelyn, do you know where your ancestors may have come from before the United States?

ES: I saw the birth certificate of my mother's mother. It said West Rutland.

SG: Really?

ES: That would be the first side, mama's side. But her dad –

SW: I don't think Grandma came from West Rutland.

ES: I know. That's what it said on the birth certificate.

SG: It sounds like your family has been in the United States for a while.

ES: Grandpa came over, I guess, when he was a kid, young. I don't mean a kid. He was in Boston for a long time because Aunt Sadie used to tell me that her father, their father, worked in a shoe factory, and then he came to Vermont. That's how he met grandma in Massachusetts. You know how families tell stories, but see, none of them are alive anymore. They're all gone.

SG: I know what you mean. Sylvia, I was just going to ask you – I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you. Did your family belong to a synagogue when you were growing up?

SW: Yes, they were one of the instrumental people in getting the synagogue started. My family had an uncle living with us. He put in some money towards it. My family was very active in trying to get it started. They actually put in money.

SG: What was it like being a Jewish girl growing up in Vermont?

SW: Just the same as anything else. You didn't think anything about it. It was a very broadminded area. I don't recall anybody pointing a finger at me or saying anything different – the teachers, the public, or anything. I just grew up.

AB: Is that how you experienced it too, Evelyn?

ES: When I was in high school, I used to remember – is it alright?

SG: Sure, go ahead.

ES: I remember when I was in school, the kids used to say to the teacher, "Hey, Evelyn's lucky. She's got Christians' Christmas, and then she gets Jewish Christmas, Chanukah. How come she gets vacations both?" They would give me off. I'd get Easter and Passover. During the Holocaust, the people in town used to – I used to get scared. I used to say to daddy, "They're going to take me and put me in a camp." The clerks knew about it and all the customers – the different people. The next-door people years ago used to say – they'd come out and say, "Evelyn, don't worry. We'll take care of you." That was Brandon.

SW: I don't recall any difference between this or that, Black or white.

SG: Did you study at the synagogue? Did they have Jewish education for you?

SW: I didn't. It was before, really. That came about a little bit later, studying in school. We'd go, but we didn't have a Sunday school when I was a little girl. That came later.

SG: Where was the synagogue? Was it in West Rutland?

SW: I'm trying to think if it was. The only one I can remember is where it is today. I don't recall it being anywhere else. I remember I think it was some high holiday; the community – say it was seventeen families or what – they'd get together. They would rent a hall. They hired a rabbi, and you had your high holidays.

SG: Did your family celebrate holidays at home too? Passover?

SW: Not too strongly, no. They weren't very [inaudible]. They would go to synagogue on the high holidays very religiously and carefully. But nothing much happened at home, except Passover, Pesach. Mom always cleaned out everything, and we had Pesach – a new set of dishes, new food, and stuff for that length of time.

SG: Did you keep kosher growing up?

SW: When I was very small, mother did, but then they sort [inaudible]. It was hard to get kosher meat and everything. Mother used to get the meat from Burlington. Every week, the truck would bring the meat. A refrigerated truck would bring the meat for the week. We had it for the whole week. We didn't go and buy something today or yesterday. The meat came in a package from the butcher, and we paid the butcher directly.

SG: Can you talk about going off to college and why you chose to study what you chose?

SW: I chose what I wanted, and I didn't get any pressure one way or the other on it. I took a classical course, studied drama and English. I majored in drama and minored in English. My folks didn't interfere one way or the other. "Just go." I studied and got good marks, fortunately.

AB: Before you went to college, when you were in high school, were there theater and drama classes at that time?

SW: No. Well, I had private. My parents paid for me to go to a teacher, to go to a drama teacher. There was nothing organized yet like that the way it is today. We didn't have drama courses. Not in the small grade school.

SG: Was there some person in your life –? Why did you choose theater? What was it about it that you liked?

SW: Just me.

SG: Just you – who you were.

SW: I liked it. That's what I liked.

AB: What do you remember about it, Evelyn?

ES: It was inside of her, the theater. She won scholarships for readings. The University of Vermont – numerous speaking contests. She won all kinds of governors' stuff.

SW: I won some drama.

ES: But this was reading.

SW: That's drama, for the drama courses.

ES: [inaudible] contests.

SW: That was also private.

ES: She took private lessons. My mother drove her every Sunday, and Daddy – we got a treat. I was with my father. We'd sit in coffee places, sit and drink coffee while Sylvia

would get special instruction at Middlebury College, Professor Goodrich, the drama coach.

SW: He was the head of the drama department.

ES: He was the head of it. He was the one that –

SW: We had to pay him.

ES: Yes, but you took whatever lessons. I don't know because I wasn't [inaudible]. I was daddy's [inaudible].

SW: I seemed to have an inclination. I liked that. [inaudible]

ES: She was very much [inaudible].

SW: Speaking contests and things like that. The usual kid stuff. [inaudible] when I was ready to go to college, I still wanted to major in drama. Am I getting too soft?

SG: No, I just want to make sure we're getting Evelyn.

AB: We

ES: She was so beautiful. It gives me goosebumps. As a little girl, I just worshiped the ground she walked on. I mean, she, to me, was the most wonderful thing that ever existed. My mother understood, and she always would laugh and let it go – never said anything. My sister would say beautiful poems. Remember "Little Bateese?"

SW: [inaudible]

ES: All the high school things you used to sing?

SW: Those classical poems.

ES: "Little Boy Blue" – "The little toy dog is covered with dust."

SW: That was Eugene Field.

ES: She had so many things – she would speak at different –

SW: Well, you had all kinds of readings.

ES: – rotary clubs. She was talented. She was special.

SW: See how I fell?

ES: I mean, she still is special, excuse me. When she would dance [inaudible] took lessons – that's when my brother-in-law must have fell in love with her.

SW: I met Howie walking down the street, stopping in there [inaudible].

SG: Can you talk about that a little bit?

ES: About Howie?

SW: One day, probably after a class that Evelyn had, we were walking by the store, the music store that he had. Mama said, "Just a minute. I've got to stop in here and get some sheet music." I knew that was baloney. So I [inaudible] to go in. I walked along. Then I got curious. So I came back, and I could see them having a wonderful time talking through the store window. I could see mother and Howie talking and laughing – looked kind of interesting, so I walked over and said hello, to see what this was all about. I went in and got introduced. But I was still rather [inaudible]. I got out of there so fast and away. He told me later he came out looking for me and couldn't find me.

SG: Why did you leave so fast?

SW: I ran in the store –

ES: [inaudible]

SW: – and I got out when I realized – when I knew this was a setup.

SG: A setup.

SW: I got out of there, and I walked away as fast as I could down to the corner. He said when he looked out – because he stood there looking for me – couldn't find me. I had gone. I disappeared. But he called me that night, and that's where it all began. We made a date, and that's where it began.

ES: It's funny.

SW: After the second date, I really knew I liked him. No doubt about it.

ES: Howie once said to me, "You're the one that did it. You had to get sheet music for your dance recital."

SG: You were getting –?

ES: I didn't ask him –

SW: No, that's what mama said – I got to stop in here.

ES: Mama made it up in the store that I had to have sheet music for my dance recital. I didn't. I did have to have – but I already had sheet music. I knew enough to shut up. You don't talk back to your mother – not to this mother. We went in, and Howie's mother was there.

SW: She was? I don't remember that.

SG: Mrs. Wolinsky?

ES: I'll never forget that.

SW: She helped him a little bit in the store in the beginning when she could – as best she could. She wasn't brought up in the business or anything.

ES: I remember that.

SW: We just began to date – another date, another date. After the first date, I knew I liked him. I really liked him. It grew deeper and deeper and developed on its ordinary path. I don't remember having any interference with Howie.

SG: Having what, Syl?

SW: What?

SG: I'm sorry. I didn't hear.

SW: I don't remember having any kind of interference with Howie. I don't think anybody objected or criticized or anything. They all seemed to like him.

ES: You mean the family?

SW: Family, yes.

SG: Family liked him?

ES: My parents – whatever Sylvia thought was good for Sylvia was good. She's not one to interfere with –

SW: Howie knew I liked school, and he didn't push me at all. I went to college that fall. I was a freshman.

SG: So you met him before you went to college?

SW: What?

SG: Did you meet him before you went to college?

SW: I must have met him – maybe it was the sophomore year, for all I know. I met him there while I was at school. But that didn't stop me from going back to school. He knew how much I thought of school, how much my father thought of school, and he never tried to push me in any way to get married [inaudible] – just waited [inaudible] opened up the store eventually. It just developed naturally.

SG: How did you go to New York City? How did both you and Howie end up in New York?

ES: Howie was in New York?

SW: Well, I'm trying to think. [inaudible]

SG: Didn't you both live there, though?

SW: I went to Syracuse University, and I graduated [from] Syracuse. But then later, my girlfriend and I met – we both had taken drama together. Her nickname was Bubbles. We took a place to live together. We shared the rent, the lease [inaudible]. It was uptown [inaudible] expensive, and it was on the river, Riverside Drive. I'd take an apartment in the building. It was sort of a hotel, a [inaudible] took a room and bathroom. You ate all your meals out. We probably made breakfast on a little burner or something. We didn't get friendly with the landlady. She was nice. But how we got to Brandon, I don't know. [inaudible] came back to Brandon.

ES: [inaudible]

SW: I don't remember how we got back to Brandon.

SG: Was it with the store?

ES: Howie was always – he took over the store when daddy died. I don't mean he took it over. He was told mother wanted him to run it. She couldn't do it. Mother was a wonderful person, but she couldn't run the business.

SW: [inaudible] too complicated.

ES: Daddy would do the books and the order and everything. So she didn't know. But Howie was business-minded, so he was good at it.

SG: Had he worked in New York before you moved up here? I thought he worked for his uncle or something?

ES: I don't know. Maybe before Sylvia, when he was younger.

SW: Howie's uncle was a book publisher in New York. He published books. Howie had worked for him a little bit. Then the Army came along, and that took care of that. I can't tell you the [inaudible] because I don't remember. I can't remember the exact history.

ES: That's alright.

SG: That's okay. It's fine.

SW: He went in the Army. He got out of the Army, [inaudible] went to Brandon for a little while.

ES: The store.

SW: I tried to work in New York and everything, but mama couldn't handle it all.

ES: What?

SW: Mother couldn't handle it all. After a while, she got [inaudible]. So I came back here. [inaudible]

ES: Senator [Robert] Stafford saved the whole thing. He stepped right in and came to the house and talked with my mother.

SW: We stayed with mother for a little – for Howie to test whether he liked the business. When we found out he did like it, then we made plans to come back to Vermont. [inaudible] test it. What if he didn't like it and we were stuck there? [inaudible]

ES: [inaudible]

SW: Howie was a very sweet man. He was very good to Evelyn. Very good to her. Not like a [inaudible] –

SG: Brother-in-law? He's like a brother.

SW: More like a brother.

ES: To me?

SG: Yes.

ES: Oh, yes. He took care of me ever since I was twelve years old.

SW: It seemed like such a natural relationship and such a natural development that nothing sticks out special. He ran the store by the station. He came up to Main Street there and started that. Meantime, the house that mother always liked was for rent – it got to be for rent, the house on Park Street. Somehow, we got to take the house over. I don't know how it came about [inaudible] –

ES: [inaudible]

SW: – the house over. Somehow, he ended up buying the house. I don't know how it came about – just living there.

SG: Before you moved to Vermont, I know you worked in the theater. Do you want to talk about that a little bit, about the things?

SW: After I graduated – I always seemed to be interested in drama [inaudible] drama contests and everything – speaking contests.

ES: [inaudible] Mr. Gross.

SW: That was later.

ES: That was a producer

SW: That was a job I found.

ES: In New York.

SW: [inaudible] a production [inaudible], a production I worked – I worked on it until the show closed. I can't remember if I came home for a while. I found another job: production assistant. In the meantime, I got married, an apartment [inaudible] just regular, very routine development. He liked theater too, you see, so that helped out. We both were very theater-interested, theater-inclined. He never pushed me, and he never stopped me.

SG: As far as the theater, you mean?

SW: Yes, as far as working.

SG: You mentioned once to me – another show you worked on – St. Louis Woman.

SW: St. Louis Woman [inaudible]. Chicken Every Sunday was one set of productions. St. Louis Woman was a different group of people. In the theater, everybody knew everybody [inaudible].

SG: What was it like to be a Jewish woman working in the theater in New York during that time?

SW: I, fortunately, have never bumped into any incidents that have to do with religion. It never got in the way [inaudible]. I don't ever recall [inaudible] talking [inaudible]. My father was very broadminded about everything. That's the way I grew up, and that's the way I looked at everybody. I guess people looked at me that way because I didn't have any sense of [inaudible] this church or that church. What mattered to me is who you were, how you actually were down deep – still does.

SG: What? I'm sorry.

SW: Still does. Certain qualifications, certain beautiful things [inaudible] beautiful person. That's what I look at.

SG: At the person. When you came back to Vermont, what did you do? What did you work at?

SW: Well, I must have worked in the store. That's what I was used to doing all through high school, helping my father. Then it used to be Saturday nights, and then it changed to Friday nights. I would go in the store and work holidays all the time. My dad would have –

GS: Had your dad passed on then?

SW: Yes, he passed on –

ES: He passed away a long time ago. He only lived – she got married, it seemed like – I figured it out – in August, and he died in October.

SG: After Sylvia and Howie got married?

ES: He was able to wait.

SW: He gave me away at the wedding.

ES: [inaudible] I think the year was '45.

SW: Something like '45 or something. Everything followed everything so naturally that I can't differentiate.

SG: Did you work in the business as well?

SW: Yes. Worked in the business, helped trimming windows – I got [inaudible] ladies' buying. Took a little while getting used to what to do. You had to learn what to buy because that's where your money was invested. If you didn't turn over your stock, boom, you end up in bankruptcy.

SW: Did you open up Jane's, or did Howie?

SW: Well, I was married to Howie when we opened it.

ES: He enlarged it. He even went to the theater. He went to the theater and bought it and made it a bargain center. So he took the whole block, Howie.

SG: Wow

ES: You know what I mean. You must have seen it.

SG: Yes, it was big.

ES: Howie enlarged himself.

SG: I got you, I got you.

ES: He was a businessman with a heart of gold, and that's unusual. Sometimes they can't be heart of gold and be a businessman.

SG: Yes, they don't always go hand in hand.

ES: People to this day mention, "I used to go in Shapiro's. I wouldn't go anyplace [else]. Howie would wait on us. Howie would say, 'If you can't find what you want, I'll order for you.'" Look it, I get goosebumps when I talk. I'm very sensitive.

SG: When you guys came back, did you join a synagogue? Were you part of that?

SW: No, no. My folks started a synagogue. [inaudible] synagogue.

SG: Right. So when you and Howie were married and moved back, were you part of a synagogue?

SW: I might have gotten married before we joined the synagogue. I might not have been settled enough yet. I couldn't tell you which step was one, which was two.

SG: That's okay. I was just wondering if you were part –

SW: Because I don't remember.

SG: Because I can remember – something I was thinking about was how both you and Howie were interested in the educational part. I know you did go to – some of the things you studied.

SW: What?

SG: [inaudible] some of the things you studied with Rabbi Goldberg or any of the –?

SG: I didn't do too much studying, I don't think. I didn't have a background as far as student background or anything with Jewish stuff. I grew up a little Vermont girl.

SG: A Vermont girl?

SW: A little Vermont girl with gentile leanings and stuff, all gentile friends but a couple maybe. I didn't notice any difference between one sect and another sect.

SG: Sylvia, I wonder if you could talk some about your work in the theater in Vermont.

SW: In Vermont?

SG: I know we worked together in [Vermont] Actors' Repertory [Theatre], but can you talk about that some?

SW: Mostly amateur theater. I didn't really do anything at the [inaudible]. Mostly amateur theater.

ES: St. Louis Woman

SW: That's later. St. Louis Woman was in New York. That wasn't around here. St. Louis Woman was – I can't remember how I got into that exactly, but I did. [Recording paused.] I've been very fortunate. Seeing a lot of – I would have liked to have seen and getting involved – doing this kind of production or that kind of production, professional theater, not just amateur theater. It all seemed so natural from one step to the next that I can't pick it apart.

SG: What are some of your favorite plays? What are some of your favorite plays that you worked with?

SG: I don't know. That's a good question. I remember St. Louis Woman, but it was a different production of St. Louis Woman.

ES: I like it too because Mr. Gross used to make up little – mama and I would take a train and go to New York to visit Sylvia, and Mr. Gross would take us out. When he took us out to that restaurant, the Jewish one, where all the actors would go – I've forgotten now.

SG: Sardi's?

ES: No, some other place. I've forgotten now. We sat at the table. All of a sudden, he said to me, "Evelyn, are you interested in show business? Would you like to be –?" "I'm not talented." He said, "No, but you can – maybe you are bitten by it." I said, "No, I'm not pretty. I'm ugly." Oh, he looked – I'll never forget that he said, "Oh, no, you're a very pretty girl." I never forgot those words. I repeated it to my mother every time she said something. "Mom, Mr. Gross said I was pretty." She says, "Of course." She didn't compliment – no compliments from Katy. You know, two girls – she was careful, just like Emily and Jenny.

SG: Syl, I know I worked with you, but mostly when you've been directing when I worked with you. I'm just wondering – you've done some acting as well, right?

SW: Some. I couldn't really tell you what shows.

ES: Summer theater. You were in summer theater.

SW: Summer theater? Well, that was after high school, after college.

What I recall is we'd get into summer theater doing production work or walk-ons, a few

lines, or something. But I couldn't tell you one from another.

SG: Did you like directing more, though?

SW: I liked directing very much. To get an acting job in New York was something. After I got married and everything and I settled down, I liked directing very much. Takes a lot of hours of study to block it out before you got to rehearsal, then hours after that. I seemed to like production pretty well, the production business as well as the acting business.

SG: When did you move into this house? You lived first in Brandon and then came here? When did you move into the Rutland community?

SW: That must be after I got married.

ES: You had an apartment on North Street Extension.

SW: She said I had an apartment on North Street. It must have had a couple of rooms.

ES: It was a good-sized apartment. It was nice.

SW: I don't remember.

SG: That's okay.

SW: She remembers better than I do when it comes to something like that. So, I had an apartment?

ES: Well, Howie and you together.

SW: Howie and I had an apartment on North Street?

ES: I think it was North Street or North Street Extension.

SG: My sister-in-law lives on North Street Extension.

ES: Yeah, a nice apartment.

SG: I can't tell you my itinerary because I don't remember.

SG: So I'm just thinking out – looking back, you guys lived through World War II, and you lived through the Depression.

SW: It had nothing to do with anything that I know of.

SG: When you look back on the different things that went on through your life as you were growing up as a young woman, as an older woman, a more mature woman, was there anything that kind of sticks out in your mind that might have affected you one way or another?

SW: No, it was all such a natural – it is hard to remember anything in particular. I remember we had this. Well, after we got married, we had the store. I learned to trim windows and everything. Then we opened up the Bargain Center. But before we opened the Bargain Center, we had the dress shop. I trimmed the windows for that. I did a pretty good job. People used to stop by to look, just to see the windows, what was in them, and stuff. That was a nice compliment. But the whole one step to the next all seemed so natural, didn't seem strange or queer – just one step to the second step.

SG: I know you mentioned that you did do some holidays. And I wondered – did your mom cook anything special for the holidays that you guys remember?

SW: I have memories that she did cook certain things.

SG: Do you want to talk about your chocolate addiction?

SW: Chocolate addiction? That I grew up with –

ES: From Grandpa.

SW: My grandpa used to like candy. You'd sit in the chair in the store. He had a small department store. He'd sit in the shoe department, and he'd buy you a ten-cent bag of candy. If you didn't have ten cents, you could buy smaller amounts of chocolates and things. I remember he had a very definite sweet tooth. Grandma, I don't remember. Grandpa liked sweets and pastries.

ES: Grandma loved us. Grandma loved us.

SG: Originally, Howie's name had been Wolinsky. What was the story of why he changed that?

SW: It just seemed more American, Vermont or something, less segregated [in] our area or something.

SG: Was it in the Army?

SW: I think we changed the name when we got married. At what point – whether we were early wedding or the Army was still going on. I don't remember the time sequence. I try to help you but I can't.

ES: I was in love with [Howie's] brother, but he wouldn't wait for me.

SG: You were too little.

ES: Alan is Dr. Alan Wells. He came to the funeral; you might have met him. And his other brother was Dr. Alan (Wolens?) and then Melville Wells, Dr. Melville Wells.

SG: Everybody kind of changed their name. So his mother [Mrs. Sarah Wolinsky] used to say, "People will think I've been married so many times."

SG: Willard.

ES: Melville Wells, Howard, Alan (Wolens?), and then her daughter (Thelma Seltzer?).

SW: That was her married name.

SG: That's funny.

SW: My background is all melded into history. I can't differentiate when this happened, or that happened.

SG: So, are there any stories you'd like to tell us about these things?

SW: I don't think I have any special stories. Plays, play rehearsals, play casting – they were all routine things. I can't remember anything particular.

SG: I wanted to ask one other thing. As an adult, how do you identify yourself as being Jewish? What kind of things do you think of being Jewish?

SW: Today, I don't dwell on it. I just am. No, I don't think one's different than the other because when we grew up in Brandon, Vermont – mostly gentiles, and everybody was the same, and nobody was Jewish. Nobody picked you apart, not that I ever knew of. I don't recall any way of knowing I was Jewish or not Jewish. I was so interested in school that I didn't stop to look for it. As long as you were kind and gentle and broadminded, I liked you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]