

ELLA SWEENEY
Interviewed by Tom Purdy
December 4, 1970

TP = Tom Purdy

ES = Mrs. Ella Sweeney

TP: Mrs. Sweeney, it is certainly very good of you to let me come here today. This is December 4, 1970 and it's a beautiful day outside. And, I'm looking forward to talking to you a little bit this morning about some of the old times here in Purdys. I know you are one of the oldest residents here in town and in my last interview with Mrs. Voris, she constantly told me to, I'd better ask Ella Sweeney about. So here I am talking to you, hoping you can tell us something about Purdys the way it was many years ago. You just told me that you weren't born here in Purdys but moved here at an early age. Can you tell me now where you were born? When and how you came to Purdys? And a little bit about the past.

ES: I was born in Farmers Mills and my father worked for a farm in Somers. In order to move closer, to be able to farm....

TP: Where is Farmers Mills?

ES: It's up near Fishkill

TP: Over near the Hudson?

ES: Yes.

TP: Well, when you moved to Somers and lived in Somers.

ES: In my younger days.

TP: Did you go to school in Somers?

ES: We went to school and we started there and did Sunday School in the old Episcopal church, it's there now. Our first Sunday school.

TP: At the Episcopal church, at St. Luke's?

ES: Yes.

TP: Well, that's interesting because that's our family church. My grandfather, Isaac Purdy, was one of the, was the first senior warden of that church, which I have some of the old minute books of the church. And, I read that. That's very interesting that you went there to church. I think that church was founded in about 1830-something. Which I'm sure the historical society would like to know that, too. It's something I didn't realize. But then you went to

ES: We were, we started Sunday school there but we were Baptists but my mother thought we should be in Sunday school and that was the closest church.

TP: Well, then you lived in Somers and when did you first come to Purdys?

ES: Well, we moved, my father then moved, it was still in Somers, the Town of Somers, down to the, where Dennis' place is. That was the farmhouse.

TP: Oh, that was a Brady. I remember when Harry Brady lived there. That's where Dennis and Arno's Restaurant is.

ES: Yes, and this was owned by his father and a man by the name of Reynolds, Mrs. Reynolds, and my father worked there as a foreman.

TP: Your father's name was what?

ES: Nathan Townsend.

TP: Townsend. Well, that's a very old name. I didn't realize that you were, your maiden name was Townsend.

ES: And then we lived in the little, tenant house near the bridge as you just as you go over 116 here.

TP: Over the Croton, what's now the Croton Reservoir there.

ES: Yes.

TP: Over the bridge.

ES: I think the water is low enough now that we can see the cellar of the old house where I used to live.

TP: On which side of the bridge? On the north side?

ES: On the right side.

TP: On the right side going over.

ES: The roads were lower

TP: That would be the north side.

ES: And further away from the, further away from the road because that was a new road that was put in.

TP: That was, I remember when that was Harry Brady's farm and I know his father was

Edward Brady and he owned a number of farms and this farm, I'm sure the historical society would be interested to know that, that farm was sold to a McGoldrick who developed all that Lake Purdy property and that was done in the late 1920s. All that property which now comprises Lake Purdy was the Harry Brady farm and it also included the restaurant there which is now Dennis and Arno's. And your father worked there on that farm. And lived there. And I suppose

ES: The house was moved back from the road quite some ways

TP: Mrs. Sweeney you were going to tell me [pause in tape]. Tape recording for the North Salem Historical Society by Thomas Purdy Jr. I'm in the process of interviewing Mrs. Sweeney and she will continue now, on this channel 2, telling us a little about her memories of Purdys, when she was a young girl living there. I believe she was, first started living there when she was 8 or 10 years old. Mrs. Sweeney could you go on and tell us a little more of your reminiscences of Purdys and what it was like in those days?

ES: I lived in the house where now Mrs. Voris owns it

TP: What was the blacksmith shop, is now

ES: Yes. And we lived there and went to school. And was there until I was probably 14 or 15 years old.

TP: That was not a blacksmith shop at the time, though, was it?

ES: No

TP: That was a....

ES: The blacksmith shop sat next to the house.

TP: Next to the house.

ES: And the house, I think, was owned by Mr. Teed, Emeryl?? Teed. My people rented it from Mr. Teed.

TP: Well, there were a lot more, a lot more stores there in Purdys at that time.

ES: Yes. There was a store owned, a record department store and it was owned by H H and T W Fowler and they served people with every,....they had a tinsmith in one part of the store and they sold feed and coal and oil, besides oil...

TP: This was in Fowler's store

ES: And they had groceries and dry goods and shoes and everything there and then there was a drugstore in the same store.

TP: A drug store there, too.

ES: Yes. And even the mail was in the store.

TP: Oh which side of the railroad tracks was that?

ES: That was on this side

TP: On the east side of the railroad tracks.

ES: And then there was a store owned by Smith, Samuel Smith

TP: That was later moved up to near the Methodist Church.

ES: Yes,

TP: And he, I remember, ran that store for years after that.

ES: That was right across the road from Mr. Fowler's. Then there was on the other side of the track, that, Ira McKeel owned a store there.

TP: That was the same store now that Berkeley Grey had and sold to Mr. Finlay and Mr. Finlay now has Leslie White operating that store.

ES: Yes, but Mr. McKeel, Mr. Minor took it over and then Mr. Grey.

TP: Mr. Minor, was he, he was related to.

ES: He was Mr. McKeel's son-in-law.

TP: That's interesting because he was Mr. McKeel's son-in-law and Berkely Grey was Mr. Minor's son-in-law. So, it went down from son-in-law to son-in-law, didn't it?

ES: And that was, he had a feed store, it was a hall-like, underneath, of these four rooms, there was a harness maker on one side and a shoemaker on the other and the back of it was feed, kept by Mr. McKeel.

TP: Well, then there was what, a lumber yard you mentioned there and there was a livery stable too, wasn't there? Who ran the livery stable?

ES: Well, Mr. R. F. White had for a while.

TP: When it was down in the old village.

ES: Yes, that was across the track, across from McKeel's store, at the right.

TP: Well, I remember Mr. White having the livery stable there ... he originally, when did he

originally come here to Purdys?

ES: I think it was in 1884, I'm not sure. I've got it in my book.

TP: 1984. He was a minister.

ES: That's right

TP: A Methodist minister. Then I suppose there was quite a business for a livery stable then. People would hire a rig and drive up to North Salem and one place or another. Usually when they did that did they hire just the horse and carriage or did they have a driver, too?

ES: Well, I can add a little to that, because I know, Jack used to hire a horse and wagon and take me for a ride

TP: Oh, he did. Jack being Mr. Sweeney. I just want to put that in for the record. Of course I know that...

ES: Most every Sunday we had a ride in the country someplace. It wasn't too far but in a horse and wagon you didn't go so far.

TP: When you went for a ride then, about how far would you go usually if you were out there?

ES: Maybe as far as Brewster or around maybe over Somers, .

TP: Well, that would be a six mile ride; that'd take, six miles one way and six miles back. That would take probably all afternoon, wouldn't it.

ES: Oh, yes.

TP: Well, then, I wanted to ask you also about the railroad. Do you remember when they, didn't they raised the tracks? Make the tracks higher?

ES: Yes, after the, after the village was taken over by the City,

TP: The property was condemned, and I know a lot of the houses were sold off the property and people bought them and either, some of them were moved away and if they were left there they were sold. But then after that was done, did they raise the railroad? Could you tell me a little bit about that? Do you remember?

ES: The tracks were raised because it was on the level where the water is, you know. If you see now where the water is off, is low, well the tracks were as low as that. And the track, the railroad had to drive over.

TP: They probably had to raise the tracks 10 or 15 feet in some places. Didn't they?

ES: I think so, yes.

TP: That must have been a tremendous charge to do that. I know my brother told me about that because he used to work on one of the engines that did that as a boy, during his vacations in the summertime and he got a great thrill out of working on the railroad. But then, can you tell me a little bit about the moving of the village and when that was moved?

ES: I think I can tell you every house that was moved here

TP: Mrs. Sweeney I suppose that when the reservoir came through here and the land was condemned, the water supply, people came, it made a tremendous change here in the community. People were very sorry to lose their businesses and their homes. Can you tell me about the change that you noticed that took place at that time.

ES: There were many people who moved away, like Mr. Godren, he had a marble yard here

TP: He moved over to Somers.

ES: And he moved to Somers. And Dr. Casselman moved to Somers. And some of the other people bought their homes and moved it in the new village. What we call the new village was up on the hill where we are now.

TP: Do you remember that property then before, as it was before it became the new village? Was it hayfields or was it wooded or what?

ES: It was hayfields and then out where Mrs. Leyden's house is. That they used to call the old stump ward. It was trees sawed down. It was always stumps there. Then, of course, Mr. Pinto bought the land from Mrs. Lobdell in back of there and he owned that property there then.

TP: We sold, my family sold quite a lot of property to Mr. Pinto at one time. Before, the property, I believe, where he built his....no it wasn't where he built the big stone house. It wasn't that property, but it was up here in the woods, and the property where he first lived. It was next to the old schoolhouse on, I believe they call that Second Street now, don't they.

ES: School Street.

TP: School Street

ES: And the old school was still standing up there, it's a tenant house now and the house next to it was the house next to this in the old village. And that is now owned by Mr. Hatchard.

TP: That was the house that Mr. Pinto first lived in when he came here, wasn't it? That was next to the old schoolhouse.

ES: Right, that old house

TP: He either bought that from my uncle or from my parents. I think, didn't he?

ES: Yes, but I think some bank came in there

TP: Yes, I know, my uncle mortgaged that house and then I think he didn't pay back the mortgage or something and the bank over in Peekskill took title to it and he sold it to Mr. Pinto, or the bank did.

ES: Yes. And the little house across the street came in to and the Russell place over here, he bought from Mr. Russell. And the stone house down there, that was down in the old village, down by the lumber yard, that house there was the, a little tenant house that Mr. Hunt owned.

TP: Well, now tell me a little about the, when the work was first started on these reservoirs. Where there a lot of new people who came into town? There must have been a lot of people that worked on the reservoir. Can you tell me where all these people lived that moved in here?

ES: Well, they had a place up here on this side of the lake that was the old Smith place and a lot of the men they used to come, just foreigners came in, by the carload and they had a, what do they call it, a quarry, or something, for them to live in. And a lot of them lived there,

TP: Up by the quarry, they had sort of a barracks, I guess.

ES: In those days I guess it was called by some other name

TP: But they had two quarries as I recall. One is up back of Engelhardt's

ES: That's right.

TP: Right in there. And they got a lot of stone from that and they had a little railroad that went up there

ES: They took the stones on the little railroad from back of Darius Lobdell's place, where now the Gusses¹ live, that was a quarry up in there and they took the stones from there.

TP: But then there was also, didn't they take a lot of stones from up here near the property, the Pinto property up further? That belonged to Darius Lobdell? There was a quarry up there, too.

ES: Yes.

¹The Guss family lived in the house that is now owned by Friends of Karen, per Debby Moore

TP: I know for years and years and years they had a big pile of stones there and I used to go and play there as a little boy. I remember I got skunked up there one time. I came upon a skunk and my mother had to bury my overcoat that I had on. I'll never forget that.

ES: When you say that, we're talking now....

TP: We're talking now, yup. So, but I remember we had quite a time. But, then, those people were, you mentioned to me earlier that Mr. Sweeney worked for Mr. Cullier. Mr. Cullier, what did he do?

ES: He was the foreman of the Department of Water Supply.

TP: He represented the water supply. When they were building the reservoir, was that, or afterwards?

ES: That, well, he lived there.

TP: He lived in the house just under the dam there.

ES: Yes, because my, Jack, my husband, was then a boy he was the water boy and the mail boy there and Mr. Cullier, he lived as a boy with Mr. Collier. And went to school and all.

TP: I remember Mr. Cullier very well and Mrs. Cullier and they had a daughter who was a few years older than me and she studied singing and was quite a concert pianist and vocalist.

ES: And your mother and Catherine [Cullier's daughter], was great friends, I know.

TP: Yes, I know. She used to go up to retreats over at St. Mary's convent over in Peekskill with my mother. Well, I haven't heard anything from her or about her in years. I wonder whatever happened to her?

ES: She was South the last I knew, down someplace in the South. And I never knew, she used to send cards, and always, you see....

TP: This was Catherine Cullier the daughter of the man who was the superintendent of the whole watershed here for the New York City Water Supply, who lived in the house under the dam, as we always referred to it.

ES: You know, I trying to find out who lived in that

TP: Mrs. Sweeney, you mentioned that a number of things, some that were amusing and some that were momentous, happened here in Purdys over the years, that you lived here. Could you tell us some of these stories about some things that happened? You mentioned something about Mr. Martin?

ES: Well, it was at the time of the dam when all the men where here working, Darius Lobdell

lived now where Mr. Guss lives, and he had a farm and he had a very lovely garden. But he found in the morning that there were a lot of things missing. So he sat up pretty much all night to know where his garden was going. And when he see some of the men coming in and picking things in the very early hours of the morning, he made up his mind he would arrest them. So he had his gun with him and they cleaned his garden out pretty well. They ran, and this one man, he had big, Mr. Lobdell had big leather boots on as the farmers all wore, and this one man he hollered and he started to run and he ran towards the village of Purdys. And he was bound he was going to get him and he went right down through Main Street, chased him over the track and then he caught him and brought him back to the Justice of the Peace. And so, they fined him and he didn't have no more trouble with his garden. He had his gun with him. Running after him.

TP: Really chased him out.

ES: You know, I can see him, I can see Mr. Martin with those great big, Mr. Lobdell with those leather boots, they were big at the top, and they squ....., you could hear him coming from a long distance.

TP: Well, I guess that's what they needed to put the fear of god in them so they wouldn't steal his vegetables. But, I heard a story one time that maybe you could tell me a little bit about, the same Mr. Lobdell, Darius Lobdell, who when they were going to build these stone walls on the boundaries of property. They were going to build right across some of his property and he took exception to that. Do you remember the story about that.

ES: Not too much. I knew there was a story there, but I don't think I could repeat it.

TP: Well, my father told me that they were going to build, condemn his property, or part of his property. This was up near the old stone quarry up here that I mentioned before. And, the City men were going to build this stone wall along the line of the property which they condemned which went right across a nice hay field of Darius Lobdell's up there. So when they came, when Darius came around and saw what they were doing, he had a big corn knife that, like a machette. A great, long bladed thing that he would cut corn with. So he saw these Italians working there and he gave a hoot and a holler and brandished this knife and started chasing them. And they got scared to death and disappeared off over the hill and never came back to build the wall again. And to this day I understand that wall had never been built along that particular section there, because Darius Lobdell chased the workmen out with a corn knife.

ES: I know that there was some chasing there and something about a wall and kind of skipped my mind about what it was. But I suppose I've heard it many a times.

TP: Well I suppose some other amusing things have happened around here, catastrophes or something. What other great events do you remember that happened here in Purdys?

ES: inaudible

TP: Mrs. Sweeney, you just mentioning to me about some of the older residents of town here.

You mentioned old Mr. Fuller, Steve Fuller. And I remember he worked for my grandparents on the farm and you were telling me how he lived to be 90. Could you tell me a little about just what you were telling me earlier about his birthday cake?

ES: Well, I used to make him a birthday cake every year for possibly five years and on his 90th birthday, I made him a cake and I always tried to surprise him. And I walked in and it was at the time of the first World War. And instead of putting the candles I put 90 flags on it, very small silk flags.

TP: It must have been a huge cake. 90 flags, even very small flags.

ES: Yes, I had to stand them in icing down around the bottom, too, you know. And I put them all over the cake, you see, and I would dip those, so they were little brass, on little brass pinsxxxx and I would dip them in wax so they wouldn't do any harm to the cake and they could eat the cake.

TP: Well, he lived in the house that now belongs to Mr. Gunnerman and I remember him sitting on the front porch of his house there along about that time of the 1st World War and shortly after and he had lost one leg.

ES: Yes,

TP: I remember, I used to go there quite frequently because he had two daughters, one was Mame Fuller,

ES: Mame, she was a dressmaker

TP: She was a dressmaker and used to spend a lot of her time over at our house, sewing and darning and taking care of things for my mother. Then she had a sister who was, what was her name?

ES: Ella

TP: Ella, she used to keep house. And, they... Did they work for my grandfather, do you remember, Mr. Fuller? I just remember when he was an invalid and incapacitated but do you remember what he did? You were telling me who Mr. Fuller worked for.

ES: Oh, that's right. Well, I'm sure he worked for your parents

TP: But you are not sure whether he worked later on for the Water Supply or not.

ES: No, I'm not sure that

TP: Whether he did that. Well, you were also mentioning, and showed me some pictures, of the milk factory that used to be here in Purdys. Now, you mentioned that you worked there. Do you remember who owned the factory and could you tell me a little bit about it? And what they did and how they did it? Was that Borden?

ES: I think it was the Borden's

TP: Condensed milk

ES: Condensed milk. And when they put up the canned milk, the condensed milk, they had girls working for them and I was one of them. I was the youngest one.

TP: How old were you then?

ES: I was about fourteen

TP: Maybe I should ask you about what date that was. About 1900? It was before 1900, wasn't it?

ES: Oh yes. I was married in 1900.

TP: Oh, you were married in 1900.

ES: I was wondering, because I'd tell ya

TP: You said you moved, about '83

ES: Is this on now?

TP: Yes, this is on now. You mentioned it was about '83 that you moved here, wasn't it? Moved to Purdys? About 1883, wasn't it?

ES: I didn't give any date, did I?

TP: You didn't give any date. I got that impression someplace.

ES: No. I was only a small girl when I moved here. That is, as I told you, about 8 or 9 years old

TP: But, then when you worked in this milk factory, what did you actually do?

ES: Well, they had machines that after the milk was condensed, enough to go into the cans,

TP: It evaporated; they boiled it.

ES: They boiled it. They took it in and it was in vats and they would boil, then they added the sugar. First it was whipped with unsweetened, more like a heavy cream and you could use it. Sometimes they took some of that out. But it was sugar put in and it was condensed and then it went upstairs in to another big vat up there. Then it was through a machine, you turned a machine, and it came out and went into these small cans. Then there was sealers and there were some that put them on the trays. I was the one that took the cans and put them on the trays, because I didn't know how to solder them. But my

sisters worked there.

TP: How many sisters did you have?

ES: I had three sisters. There were four girls. I am the only one living.

TP: Well, your sisters worked there, and then.

ES: And Mr. McCorry's daughter worked there and a lot of women came down from Brewster. From the factory up there, to teach them here how to solder and how to work the machines. A man by the name of Mr. Totten, Will Totten, was the foreman over the mill there. And, I'll tell you, Andrew Miller, that Walter Miller's father, was one of the men that worked there on the platform when the milk was brought in the morning.

TP: Now, Walter Miller, you mentioned him. He lived next to our house which has since been torn down, the big house there that was torn down, that lived there and he married a Mae Bailey.

ES: Yes, that's right.

TP: That came from Ridgefield, from Danbury. And they were the Baileys that had the bottled water there, over there on the way to Danbury, near, between Mill Plain and Danbury.

ES: And her aunt owned that, Mrs. Miller's aunt, owned that house there, Aunt Nancy she used to call her.

TP: That was Reynolds, wasn't her name Reynolds?

ES: Nancy Reynolds, yes.

TP: Who owned that house. It's still there now. I don't know who lives in that house. It has been sold, I believe.

ES: You don't know now who lives there.

TP: Who lives there. Do you know who lives there?

ES: Mr. Maggio.

TP: Maggio. Oh, he lives there.

ES: He bought it from the Millers.

TP: I didn't know who owned that. But then, Walter Miller was some relation of Miss Mahoney. Mahoneys. How was that, how were they related?

ES: Well, Walter Miller's mother was Miss Mahoney's, Margaret and Jane Mahoney's sister.

TP: And then there was a Mrs. Rooney

ES: Yes, and she was another sister.

TP: She was another sister. I'm going to get that straight. Well, you were telling me, let's get back to the milk factory which I think is interesting. I suppose most all the farmers around here took their milk to the factory.

ES: Oh, yes, they had a big platform and a great big tank and this milk was unloaded on the platform, wheeled over and dumped in the tank. Then they had the, the cans were cleaned, steamed, and put back in the horse and wagon that they drove in.

TP: I suppose they came from far and wide, morning and evening? Or was it just once a day?

ES: It was generally delivered every morning.

TP: I suppose it was a big traffic jam down there in those days.

ES: Well, it wasn't like the automobiles, I'll tell you that.

TP: When they were delivering milk. Well, then they would condense the milk and sweetened it and put it in these cans, then what did they do?

ES: Then they would box them right there and they were shipped.

TP: Out by railroad?

ES: Well, now, I don't remember whether a truck came and took them to the railroad or whether they had to go to another factory first.

TP: This was before the days of motor trucks.

ES: Oh, yes.

TP: It would be a horse and wagon.

ES: Horse and wagon.

TP: Well, they would come and horse and wagon might come and take them or they would go on the railroad, probably.

ES: They were all boxed.

TP: Well, you must remember, of course, long before they had any automobiles here in town. Don't you, I suppose. Do you remember who had the first automobile? Probably Harry

Brady, or one of the Bradys.

ES: Let me see, I did know who had the first. I think your uncle Hart Purdy had the first one. And I can remember him coming over in front of the store, I lived upstairs. And it was in 19..

TP: He was my brother, my half brother

ES: Oh, that's right.

TP: Hart was. I know that he was very much interested.

ES: Well, he had the first one and Ira McKeel and they used to get down front and go 'round. It was one of them Fords that the wheel was in front, you know. Like a little old buckboard wagon.

TP: I remember he and Harry Brady had a racing car, had an old Stutz racing car and they didn't let their parents know but they entered the races over at Danbury Fair one time. They were in the races and my father happened to go over there and who should he see racing around the track but his own son. That didn't go over very well for him. He made him give up that racing. That was a Stutz racer that he had,....with Harry Brady.

ES: I remember, George George, the colored boy that used to live here?

TP: He used to drive for us.

ES: I know he was on with your brother, at the back, the watcher or something, they called it, when it went around the track and he said if anybody ever turn white with fright, he could turn white.

TP: My brother made jokes. George turned white, he scared himself.

ES: He did. He was so scared he wanted to turn white. He was a great fellow, George was, he was a wonderful colored boy.

TP: He was an awfully nice fellow and I remember he gave me a little toy automobile that he found someplace he gave it to me. And it was one of my real treasures. Oh, when I, it was way back. I can just barely remember him. He was quite a person. Speaking of racing and race tracks and all that, there was an old bicycle track down in front of what is now our office, down there, by the old family homestead. Do you remember when they used to bicycle there?

ES: Well, I can remember when....I thought they had, first were horse races, didn't they?

TP: I don't know. I always heard of it as a bicycle track.

ES: Maybe not, I could be mistaken. But I know it was bicycles there.

TP: Do you remember. Can you tell us a little bit about what they did there?

ES: No, I'm afraid I can't. I don't remember too much of that. I wasn't one of those kind that, I do like sports now but at that time, it didn't amount to anything.

TP: You don't even remember seeing them even?

ES: Oh yes, we used to go down to stand and watch them go around the circle. We wondered what they, they were crazy, I guess. I don't know why that is [laughter]

TP: Well they weren't going anyways, just around and around the circle. Were those big high front wheel bicycles or were they what they called the Safetys, where both had the same size wheels?

ES: I think they were both the same size. They could have had some of the others, but I don't remember.

TP: Didn't they call the ones that had the same size front wheel and back wheel, they called those Safetys, didn't they?

ES: I think so.

TP: Because the others you had to climb way up on

ES: You had to climb up on, but I can remember those going around the village, too. Not too many.

TP: But, then there was, I remember my brother used to have a horse, a trotter, that he used to race around that track.

ES: Yes, I think I remember that, because I thought it were horses there too at one time but I didn't remember if it was before or after.

END interview.