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1968

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WILLIAM J. GRIFFIN. ORAL
HISTORY INTERVIEW, 1958.

GUIDE

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Griffin, William Joseph.
Oral history interview, 1958.
1 v.

Original interview held by the Forest History Foundation, Inc., St. Paul, MN.
Summary: Reminiscences concerning Griffin's life as a lumber camp worker, sawmill operator, farmer, and maple syrup cooperative president, and concerning the hardships of his Irish immigrant parents in the 1840s and 1850s. Interview conducted by Charles D. Bonsted.

Described in REPORT OF THE CURATOR AND ARCHIVIST, 1958-62.

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Griffin, William Joseph, 1863-1959. Oral History Interview, May 1958; 1 vol.

Reminiscences concerning Mr. Griffin's life as a lumber camp worker, sawmill operator, farmer, and maple syrup cooperative president, with comments on forest conservation practices and on the production and marketing of maple syrup; and concerning the hardships of his Irish immigrant parents in the 1840's and 1850's. Town of Fine, St. Lawrence County. Interview conducted by Charles D. Bonsted. (26 pp. typescript carbon copy in binder; original held by the Forest History Foundation, Inc., St. Paul, Minnesota).

Card entries:

Griffin, William Joseph, 1863-1959. Oral History Interview, May 1958.

Cross references to main entry:

Fine, Town of (St. Lawrence County)
Conservation (forest)
Cooperatives (maple syrup)
Forestry
Immigration (Irish)
Lumber industry (St. Lawrence County)
Maple syrup production and marketing
Reminiscences (St. Lawrence County)
Rural life
Sawmills

In Mss. file, Box 50, [REDACTED]

Oral History Interview with William Joseph Griffin, Oswegatchie, New York, ,
May 19 & 20, 1958.

Introduction - 95 years old, physical and mental well-being, vigorous. Primarily a farmer, but also connected with maple syrup production and forestry in general;

Interview - W.J.G. - born June 29, 1863. Father came from Ireland, worked in N.Y. and Southern states, familiar with plantation life. Returned to Ireland fearing his father's death and found it to be true. Married in Ireland and returned to America with his wife, the former Elizabeth Donovan. Ocean trip 7 weeks. Landed finally in Oswego and settled in Brewston.

His father was contacted by a land agent seeking residents for the forest tracts. Land was sold for one dollar per acre. Griffin and John Welch families bought 100 acres of the land on contract. Judge John Fine gave Griffin's father the first deed. The first tract was part of Macomb's purchase.

The two families arrived on May 9, 1842, and lived in an abandoned squatters' cabin (15 x 20 feet). There were 6 people. Squatters had burnt the timber and sold the soda or beach salt (ashes).

Griffin and Welch families met hardships on the land, and agent offered to release them in 1843 from the contract and return them to Oswego, but they refused.

Brother Tom was born a few months after they arrived.

Father had saved some gold from his work in Georgia, so they had something to live on. Griffin bought out Welch's share and had the 100 acres for himself. The Welches moved to Gouverneur and later bought a farm 3 miles away. [Here Griffin notes he is the last survivor of the 3 families - Welches, Griffins, and Sullivans.]

The men were inexperienced in this life and knew nothing about clearing the land. Tools were few - ax, shovel, and hoe. A store was 10 miles away. Primitive methods of getting flour from the wheat they grew.

Many hardships endured by his parents, but they never regretted it. Mentioned baptism of Tom in Watertown and parents walking back 60 miles.

Three sisters, unmarried, oldest taught school at 15 yrs. old in log cabin.

Other family in area - Brown - came from Vermont (?) in early 1830's. Landowners built him a house and a sawmill. Griffin's sister taught his children and her own sisters and brothers.

Mention that Cornelius Carter from South Edwards was the first to teach that school.

Sister Katherine taught for 40 years in Minn., Ohio, Maryland, etc. All 3 sisters were teachers.

Brown's sawmill probably first in area, very primitive.

Children of Griffin's parents in order: Thomas (died as an infant), Katherine, Julia, John, Elizabeth, Florence, Albert, and WJG (1863-) Children born over span of 21 years. All regarded New York State as their home;

Brother Albert went to Lewiston, Minn. for 5 - 6 years. Bought land on Mesabi Range, but did not hold on to it.

Daniel Truax bought the next 100 acres after the Griffins had been there for a while.

Town of Fine organized in 1844. Three neighbors- Brown, Truax, Griffin (1854) served as first supervisors of the town. Truaxes later went to Minnesota.

Conversation returns to the squatters who burned hardwood timber, mostly beech and maple, and took the potash 10 miles away at Shawville where they bartered it for food and supplies.

Mr. Shaw, shrewd businessman, took mortgages on anything the people had. Kettles that people had probably were made in the town of Rossie where the iron mines were.

Brown made lumber only for local use at his mill. Barn on Truax place - 1846.

Griffin's father had little income from timber - no transportation = no market. His business was devoted to raising cows, farming, clearing land. Father died in 1881 when WJG was 18 yrs. old.

WJG's work - 17 yrs. - lumbering and drawing logs to the Oswegatchie River to be floated to mills in Gouverneur. Pay was \$ 3.00 per day. [Wood was spruce and pine.] Those who boarded earned \$1.50 - \$1.75 per day.

Lumber camp was on Skate Creek. Describes his first day at the camp. Went to another camp and then returned to the first one. Logged from before Christmas to March - wood logged was spruce.

Lumber was milled at Natural Dam, sawmill operated by Weston, Dean, and Aldrich.. Latter Rushmore Paper Company was located there.

Griffin's father died when he was 18, and he then worked on the farm with his mother and sisters. In early 1890's operated hardwood mill with Newton Aldrich. Sold after 3-4 years, and he returned to the farm. Crops were hay, oats, potatoes, and corn. He also did some lumbering until the supply on the farm was exhausted. Practiced selective cutting by selling-stumpage on an acreage. Largest sale in 1945 was tract of maple stumpage.

Discussions of maple tapping. Griffin was president of State cooperative for 22 years and also the first president of it. He blames Cornell for the fact that the cooperative almost failed. Cornell was responsible for getting cooperatives started, but did not help the inexperienced men in making them succeed. Tells of incident where 150,000 gallons of maple syrup had to be

sold in bulk at a low price through mishandling of the plan to process and sell it. People lost confidence in the cooperative, but it later moved from Syracuse to Gouverneur and it built up again.

Tells how in 1956 the American Tobacco Co. stopped buying the low products of maple syrup and cut off their markets for these products. Now company depends largely on retail trade throughout the U.S. and also England.

Peak year of cooperative was in early 1930's - handled about 30,000 - 40,000 gallons a year.

Began with 600 or 700 members from all of N.Y.S. where the syrup was produced. Today - about 50 members.

Speaks of fisheries in Nova Scotia that formed cooperatives under the leadership of Father Thompkins. Tells of his visit with the priest.

Tells how his father tapped trees - in primitive manner. Describes how syrup was made. Says his production was as high as 1,000 gallons of syrup in a season. Before the cooperative, syrup sold for 50 to 75 cents a gallon. After cooperative formed in 1922, they got 3 to 4 dollars a gallon.

Salary for work connected with maple syrup produced used to be \$ 1.50 a day or \$.15 an hour. The first manager got \$3,000, but only lasted a year. He's planned for production of individual service of syrup for railroads and ship lines but this idea failed, and it almost led to the break-down of the cooperative.

There are no other state cooperatives in the maple business.

Conversation turns to timberland. Griffin sold maple wood to Emporium Lumber Company and also to a company at Natural Bridge. Shoe lasts and heels and bowling pins were among things made from the wood.

Discusses fact that little thought was given to replanting and thus perpetuating the timber.

Speaks of the Scriba Tannery at Fine, N.Y. where the hemlock bark was used for tanning sole leather for shoes. Hides came from South America. Shipped out by rail at DeKalb Junction, company was Rice, Emory & Co. whose home office was in Boston. Tannery operated about 28 years, from early 70's to 1902. Went out of business due to failing supply of hemlock.

Hemlock logs at first just peeled to get bark and left to decay; later in early 1890's, they were sent on to lumber mill at Gouverneur. Used railroad shipping. Today hardwood logs are smaller than previously.

In 1892, Griffin himself became a sawmill operator. Mr. Aldrich put up a great deal more money than Griffin. Mill was called the Northside Lumber Co. - they dealt in hardwood and used R.R. transportation. Aldrich and Griffin had many losses due to business slump in 1892 and 1893. Mill went out of business in early 1895. Had employed 20 - 40 men, wages were \$ 1.35 a day, work week was 6 days. Timber supply came from Griffin land and also from land owned by Weston, Dean, and Aldrich.

After sawmilling, he returned to farming and also began Guernsey raising. He had his father's 320 acres and 500 acres which were mostly forests. His father had done the bulk of the clearing of the land.

In 1897 Griffin married Mary Agnes Cummins of Carthage in St. Michael's Church in Fine.

Talk returns to tapping maple trees. Griffin describes early methods of tapping the trees. Tells how his father made maple sugar and also the marketing of it. His father tapped about 500 trees.

Tells how timber values were high during World War I.

The people in the area looked on timber as a supplement to their main income from farming, and not as their major interest. Decline in lumbering

came about due to the supply being depleted. He tells of replanting program carried on by the Ranger School and of Prof. Dubuar, and of trees he and his brother John planted in 1923-1924. John gave the town of Fine 40 acres of forest land, and it was the first municipal township forest in New York State.

The Ranger School - is situated on the land owned previously by the Rich Lumber Co. who had exhausted their lumber supply. Otto Hamele acquired that company's holdings for the Ranger School which was a great success.

Discussion of the Adirondack Reserve made by a constitutional amendment by the State. Griffin thinks cutting that is supervised by the Conservation Department is not an answer to damage that could be done to timberland because people are influenced by money.

Describes meeting with Adirondack Murray who took a party of rich people camping in the woods. Party was organized by Charlie Holmes. The group stayed overnight at the Griffin's place (WJG was 12 or 14 then). He describes the group and how the trees were peeled of their bark to make shelter at the camp. Their misuse of the forest led the trees to decay.

Griffin's son Frederick is a forest ranger, lives on part of the old farm. Has been with the Conservation Department for about 20 years.

Coversation ends with mention of Griffin's interest in forest fire prevention.