

**Edna Canham Priest Oral History Interview, 2001
Administrative Information**

Narrator: Edna Canham Priest

Interviewer: Elaine Serdensky

Date of Interview: 2001

Place of Interview: Priest family house, Sullivan Avenue, South Windsor, CT

Length: 13 pages, 38:25.7 minutes

Biographical Note and Abstract

Edna Canham Priest was born July 2, 1914, grew up in Auburn, Maine, and attended Bates College. She worked as a schoolteacher for thirty-two years, eighteen in Maine and fourteen in Connecticut, ending her career in the Windsor Locks school district. She married Norman Priest, whom she had known for twenty-five years, later in life and moved to his dairy farm in South Windsor. She died on May 24, 2006.

In this interview, Priest discusses Norman Priest's family history and the history of his family's land, as well as how she met him and how they came to be married. She discusses the dairy farm and her decision to donate the land to a land trust. She also talks about the stores she shopped at when she moved to South Windsor, and mentions how she got her cat.

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**Edna Priest
Oral History Transcript
2001
Interviewed by Elaine Serdensky**

SERDENSKY: **0:00:02.3** —5, 2001. This is an interview with Edna Priest on the Priest land on Sullivan Avenue in South Windsor. The interviewer is Elaine Serdensky. Edna, will you tell me how the property came to be in the family and how long ago?

PRIEST: Well, it's always been in the same family. On all maps of South Windsor, the name is Mrs. Stoughton. Mrs. Stoughton's son went down around the cape in—I don't know when—'49? She was alone on the farm, needed help. She sent word—I don't know how—to her nephew in Ohio. He was 14 years old. He walked with two oxen and came here, and that was Norman's [Norman Priest] grandfather [Wilbur Hills].

SERDENSKY: That's interesting.

PRIEST: The house has always been in one family. I think that's remarkable.

SERDENSKY: It is.

PRIEST: An 1823 house.

SERDENSKY: Was that when the house was built?

PRIEST: Uh-hunh [affirmative], as far as I know. I—sorry, I don't know more than I do know. I just picked up some of these things. I think that's probably so. But can you imagine a 14-year-old boy with two oxen walking from Ohio to South Windsor? Norman's grandfather.

SERDENSKY: **0:02:03.2** And how many children did he have? Did he stay here?

PRIEST: Oh, yes, he lived right here. The house has always been in that family.

SERDENSKY: Did he marry?

PRIEST: Must have.

SERDENSKY: He had children here?

PRIEST: I don't know who or how. Norman was an only child. His father was from Switzerland. The father's brother lived at the center in South Windsor, Wapping. Norman's father, whose name was Prether, changed it to Priest, came from

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Switzerland to his brother's house, and in the way of things eventually married Abbie Hills. And Abbie Hills was Norman's mother—grandmother?—mother, I think.

SERDENSKY: Norman was an only child?

PRIEST: Norman was an only child.

SERDENSKY: He was born not in South Windsor?

PRIEST: His mother lived here at the time of his birth, but he always insisted, "Oh, no, I was born in the hospital in Hartford." He was not born right here. He insisted on that.

SERDENSKY: That's good. Where there any other buildings on the property?

PRIEST: When?

SERDENSKY: **0:03:56.4** Would you know of any that were torn down?

PRIEST: Just a barn since I came. Norman put an ad in the paper that said "free for the taking," so a man from Manchester came, took down the barn and the cow shed—took the whole thing down and carried it off. Now we can see the silo. We couldn't before. The silo is not going to come down. It's pretty solid.

SERDENSKY: Good. And how large a property was it originally?

PRIEST: Somebody said 73 acres.

SERDENSKY: And what do they use it for?

PRIEST: Dairy farm.

SERDENSKY: They have the cows?

PRIEST: Yeah.

SERDENSKY: Cow farm—does that mean a cow barn then?

PRIEST: Right, a dairy farm until—I retired from teaching, and Norman sold the cows, so then he could do things that he wanted to with plants and garden and we could travel. We went to England three times. We went to the Northwest three times. We went to Florida once. So we did travelling after. But of course, there was a long time that my connection with Norman was only as my family would go from Maine to see friends in New Jersey. We

would always stop in Wapping and see the Priests and the Hillses. This house has always been in the same family.

SERDENSKY: And what will happen to it now?

PRIEST: **0:05:58.4** It's now in the land trust, all taken care of. I have life occupancy. My lady that I call my financial advisor is in charge of it. It's just what I wanted. I don't like having to think what's going to happen to this house, but now I know. It's in the land trust.

SERDENSKY: And what do they expect to do with it?

PRIEST: I have no idea.

SERDENSKY: Have they given you any indication of what they're going to do with the property?

PRIEST: No. No, I haven't seen them. I don't know anything about it, but I don't care. I have life occupancy. That's really all that matters to me. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: Tell me about the remodeling that you have done.

PRIEST: We haven't done anything upstairs, but what was the shed is now what I call the Pink Room. The kitchen I've done over completely. The living room has been papered and painted. The next room in front was painted. And the bedroom didn't need anything done to it. We didn't do anything upstairs.

SERDENSKY: But you're only using the downstairs yourself now?

PRIEST: I use the downstairs. Have a shower, a toilet downstairs. What else could I need?

SERDENSKY: Tell me about Norm. How did you meet him?

PRIEST: He went to Bates College. My mother, at that time, was advertising the selling of plants. From Bates College, Norman went over to see this woman who was selling plants, because his interest was always in gardens and plants. Then, as I tell people, 25 years later, he bought my diamond.

SERDENSKY: **0:08:34.0** You waited 25 years.

PRIEST: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

SERDENSKY: Where were you married?

PRIEST: In Maine—Auburn, Maine. My mother's garden.

SERDENSKY: And when did you come here?

PRIEST: In '55.

SERDENSKY: You've been here ever since.

PRIEST: Right. But I knew Norman a long time before that. People say it took him 25 years to get you? [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: Did you keep in touch with him all 25 years?

PRIEST: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, more or less. Every time we went to visit our friends in New Jersey, we would stop in Wapping, South Windsor, and see the Priests and the Hillses. And eventually—I think that this perhaps would be of interest—in January, he called up and told me that his father had died.

In February, he ordered delivered to me 5 pounds of the best commercially homemade chocolates that ever existed—ever—5 pounds. The man who lived where they were made was so impressed that he delivered them in person, 6 or 8 miles away. And then—that was February—in March, I went to Boston. I don't know why I was going to Boston, but anyway, he came up to Boston. He had a roll of cloth. I probably still have that roll of cloth. I don't know what it was for. I don't know anything about it. He probably picked it up in the Salvation Army. That's where he got most of the things he got. So in March, cloth. In April, I went to Boston. Norman came up. He had with him a handful of rings, because he wanted to know how big my finger was. In May, he brought my diamond.

SERDENSKY: And you knew?

PRIEST: **0:11:10.1** And in August, we were married in Maine, in Auburn, in my mother's garden. I've been here ever since.

SERDENSKY: Did you come right away, after your marriage?

PRIEST: We had a 2-week honeymoon, went to Niagara. Doesn't everybody who gets married go to Niagara? Then we went to Montreal. We had to come back fairly soon because my niece was being married 2 weeks after I got married. We had to go to that wedding, naturally. Then we came down here.

While he was gone, Norman had a hired man, who was new, and Norman never knew anything about this man. I think he probably worried, but he didn't tell me. Someone said that while we were gone this new hired man, who did not have a driver's license, started out toward

the street with the tractor. He planned to go up to the package store. I don't know who stopped him or how, but I'm sure he didn't go. But that was one of the things that Norman had to worry about while we were gone.

SERDENSKY: But the cows were well taken care of?

PRIEST: Oh, yes. Yeah. But the man wanted to go to the package store. Didn't get there. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: Was the tractor Norm's?

PRIEST: Oh, yes.

SERDENSKY: Did he live in the house here—stay in the house?

PRIEST: Yes, we have a hired man's room. It's always been the hired man's room. I still call it that. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: That's interesting.

PRIEST: **0:13:16.3** When I have company—I don't have much company, but when I do, they sleep in the hired man's room, unless they sleep here. A while ago, my grandnephew and his wife and their two children came here, brought their own sleeping bags. So two of them slept here, and two of them slept in the hired man's room. No beds. Just they slept. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: Kids do that.

PRIEST: Well, their parents did too.

SERDENSKY: Tell me about Norm's mother and father.

PRIEST: I don't know what to tell.

SERDENSKY: Well, he was from Switzerland. Where—how did they meet? You have any idea?

PRIEST: Yes. He came over because his brother lived at the center—Wapping Center. He came from Switzerland, changed his name from Prether to Priest, and somehow got acquainted with Abbie Hills. Then they were married.

SERDENSKY: Then he moved in here.

PRIEST: Yeah. Abbie had always lived here. On the old maps, this house is called Mrs. Stoughton. She was some kind of ancestor of Norman's—distant.

SERDENSKY: Do you know of any more of the ancestors at all?

PRIEST: No. Louis Priest lived at Wapping Center, and John Paul Ather—JPA Priest—went there and somehow got acquainted with Abbie Hills. And at one time, Norman's father ran a store down at the center, which was also the Wapping Post Office. I don't know just where it was, but on Ellington Road somewhere. He was not really a farmer. He was better at running a store.

SERDENSKY: **0:16:03.5** When you had the dairy farm, did you sell milk, dairy products here?

PRIEST: Just milk. A big truck would come. We had a milk tank—bulk tank. And a truck would come, fill up from the bulk tank—which was down off the barn—and go on. We didn't sell milk individually. We just sold in bulk. And as soon as I retired from teaching, Norman sold the cows. Then we were free.

SERDENSKY: And where did you teach, Edna?

PRIEST: My last teaching was in Windsor Locks.

SERDENSKY: What were you?

PRIEST: Seventh, I think. But I have taught everything from first grade up through postgraduate. I've taught in a 1-room school, 2-room schools, and that was nice. I got the job because I had two certificates—elementary and secondary. And the room I had was grades sixth, seventh, and eighth, nine, ten. And the superintendent, I'm sure, planned it that way. In the other room, grades one through five, he got the girl I grew up with. So we boarded at the same place. But we had been friends forever, and I thought that was nice.

SERDENSKY: Yes. Is she still alive?

PRIEST: Yep.

SERDENSKY: You keep in touch?

PRIEST: She's not good at that. She is in Maine. I saw her last time I was in Maine. My nephew took me up to see her. I have family in Maine and Vermont and Virginia and New York. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: **0:18:37.8** Tell me, when did Norm become interested in horticulture?

PRIEST: Always—always. I don't think he ever really liked cows, but they were his job, because this was a dairy farm.

SERDENSKY: And what did he do with it?

PRIEST: What'd he do with what?

SERDENSKY: His horticulture, how did he—?

PRIEST: Oh, just enjoyed it.

SERDENSKY: He didn't sell, didn't open up a shop or anything?

PRIEST: No. No, but when he was at Bates he saw that my mother advertised plants for sale. He went over to see those plants for sale, and 25 years later he bought my diamond.

SERDENSKY: And where did you go to college?

PRIEST: Bates, but not at the same time he did. He graduated in '34. I graduated in '37, but I had just 3 years because I had normal school before. But I have taught everything, which I think is unusual for most people.

SERDENSKY: It is nowadays.

PRIEST: My first school was a 1-room school. This was in—this I get a kick out of. When I was in fifth grade, I decided that that's what I wanted to do—teach fifth grade. That's the only grade I've never taught. My first school, 1-room school, had every grade but fifth. My next school was a 2-room school. Grades one through five were in the other room. I had six, seven, eight, nine, and ten.

SERDENSKY: **0:20:42.6** Did you ever ask for grade five?

PRIEST: No. I substituted. My first year down here, I did a lot of subbing, and one day I got called in for fifth grade. I was to be there 2 days. One of them was a class trip. [Laughs] So I've taught fifth grade one day.

SERDENSKY: That's too bad.

PRIEST: Well, it doesn't really matter, because I guess I liked the other grades too. But I taught for 32 years—18 in Maine and 14 in Connecticut.

SERDENSKY: Did you teach anywhere else but except Windsor Locks, in Connecticut?

PRIEST: No. No, just the subbing I did. But that subbing was really something. I put my name in, and since I was married, I came here. And I got called in Thanksgiving week first. I taught 100 days that year, so I figured I might as well teach full time, so that's what I did—full time.

SERDENSKY: They need teachers now.

PRIEST: No, thank you. [Laughs]

SERDENSKY: Is there anything else in Norm's background that would be interesting?

PRIEST: Norman was a farmer, but his heart was not in it. His heart was in his garden and plants. You see, I still have plants. All I do is water them once a week. Don't know what they are, but they do pretty well.

SERDENSKY: They're beautiful.

PRIEST: 0:22:53.1 I have these and the ones out in what used to be the shed.

SERDENSKY: And what are your interests now?

PRIEST: I guess probably family. I have four nephews and a niece, and one of them lives in Virginia, one in Vermont, and I think the rest are in Maine. I think.

SERDENSKY: Do you miss Maine?

PRIEST: Oh, yes. But I'm pretty well settled here. I don't know where I'd go if I should go back to Maine. But I have nephews and a niece up there, so I have family up there. I don't have family in Connecticut. But they're good to me. They come to—

SERDENSKY: They come often, don't they?

PRIEST: Every year there's somebody here. Right this minute, one nephew and his wife are in the—on a cruise in the Caribbean. They stopped here on their way, before they went. And they flew out of Bradley, but they came here first.

SERDENSKY: That's nice.

PRIEST: They're good to me.

SERDENSKY: Why didn't you leave the land to your nephews and niece?

PRIEST: They wouldn't want it. And my financial advisor took care of it; put it in the land trust. No, I don't think they'd want it. Didn't think about it, but I think she has taken care of them financially rather than any other way.

SERDENSKY: **0:25:07.8** You gave some of the property—you sold some of the property, too, didn't you?

PRIEST: Across the street—Peachbrooke was Norman's land. He sold it. They built Peachbrooke.

SERDENSKY: Describe Peachbrooke a little bit so people will know what—

PRIEST: Peachbrooke is a housing affair. I love the way the streets are—A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. Amaryllis—I don't remember what the others are, but they named the streets alphabetically.

SERDENSKY: Alphabetically lists of flowers?

PRIEST: Probably. But they're alphabetical. I think that's kind of nice. I don't know people in Peachbrooke.

SERDENSKY: Are they seniors or open to anybody?

PRIEST: Anybody. I don't know if there are children. I think there probably are. I used to know a lady who lived up there, but I don't think I know anyone up there now. There was a time I used to go hiking up around Peachbrooke, but trying to cross Sullivan Avenue is no longer any fun. And besides, I'm lazy. It takes energy to walk up around Peachbrooke.

SERDENSKY: It takes energy to cross Sullivan Avenue.

PRIEST: [Laughs] Yes. Sometimes when I'm driving I sit and wait and sit and wait, if I want to go up to Geissler's.

SERDENSKY: **0:26:58.4** That reminds me, where did you shop when you first came here? Were there stores?

PRIEST: Probably Geissler's. Oh, probably down at—what's the name of the place down here? I don't know.

SERDENSKY: Geissler's was still here?

PRIEST: Geissler's is up. I used to go to Harkins', and I used the post office at East Windsor Hill to buy stamps because the Wapping Post Office—I mean the South Windsor Post Office—not easy to get to. But East Windsor Hill is easy. And I—that's where I get my stamps.

SERDENSKY: But were there any department stores or any—other than a grocery store, was there anything else here in Wapping?

PRIEST: That's a good question. I don't know. What's the name of that place down at the end of Buckland Road? There's a store down there. There used to be a Waldbaum down there, but they closed.

SERDENSKY: Burr's Corners?

PRIEST: Yeah, Burr's Corner. But there's a store over there. I've forgotten what it is. I don't do much shopping. I buy groceries. That's it. The other day I looked in one of my closets here and found that I have about 10 or 15 shirts of Norman's. I can wear Norman's shirts. I don't need to buy any shirts for another 100 years. [Laughs] See? This is one of them.

SERDENSKY: That's a pretty one.

PRIEST: I have to turn the cuffs up, but I can do that.

SERDENSKY: **0:29:23.9** Tell me a little bit about the dishes. Where did they belong?

PRIEST: They've always been here, as far as I know. I don't know whether—I don't know whose they were. There was a set of Limoges. There was a set of gold band, but I sold that. The china closet was really too full, and I was glad there was somebody who wanted that gold band, so I got rid of the gold band, and now I have a good looking china closet.

SERDENSKY: It is. It's beautiful.

PRIEST: Don't use the things.

SERDENSKY: Now, you said the house goes to the land trust. How about the furniture?

PRIEST: I think my niece will take care of that.

SERDENSKY: That doesn't belong—go with the house?

PRIEST: No. But my niece will probably—she was here when Norman went—I had

that phone call. He was—first he was over at Rockville General, and I was fortunate that too, because my cousin was here working when Norman had his first heart attack. He took him over to Rockville General, and then they moved him to South Windsor Nursing Home. My niece was here when I had that call at 2:30 in the morning. I said, “I’ll be right over.” That niece of mine drove my car. She’d never driven it, but she drove my car so that I could go over and just touch him when he went.

SERDENSKY: That’s always a shock.

PRIEST: Yeah.

SERDENSKY: **0:31:34.3** And how long ago was that?

PRIEST: Three—three years. Three years this month.

SERDENSKY: I have here the plaque—the trust—public land presented to you. That’s lovely. Would you like to read it?

PRIEST: “Whereas the Priest farm is an important agricultural and recreational resource for the town of South Windsor; whereas the inappropriate development of farmland constitutes a serious threat to the traditional economic and social fabric of many communities; whereas farmland conservation pays real dividends in providing jobs and income, protecting rural character, controlling urban sprawl, and contributing to a higher quality of life; whereas the Priest family has demonstrated a personal and lasting commitment to protecting agricultural resources in the town of South Windsor; whereas the hard work and dedication of the Priest family has resulted in the protection of the 73-acre Priest Farm on Sullivan Avenue; now therefore be resolved as a trustful public land, recognizes and applauds the commitment of the Priest family to the permanent protection of Connecticut’s agricultural resources. Julie Iffland, Project Manager; William Rogers, President. November 1998.”

SERDENSKY: It’s very lovely.

PRIEST: It’s good to have.

SERDENSKY: It’s nice to have. Is there anything else you can think of to talk about? Now, tell me about your interests. You’re active in the Historical Society?

PRIEST: **0:33:38.4** Right. And I’m Friends of the Library. I go up to the senior center sometimes. Not very often. Not as often as I should. But I’m glad that Norman was around when he decided to take the barn down, and that was good. He put an ad in the paper, “Free for the taking—barn.” I don’t know just what it said. But a man came, tore down the barn, hauled the stuff off, and now we can see the silo. Didn’t need the barn. It was falling down. Norman sold the cows when I retired from teaching. I had taught 32 years. That was enough, I

thought. He sold the cows. Then we were able to take trips. We went to England three times. We went to the northwest two or three times. We went to Florida and had a cruise. We went to Montreal—Niagara. Doesn't everybody go to Niagara? But we went to Montreal. Had to come back because my niece was being married in 2 weeks. That was nice that she was married just 2 weeks after I was.

SERDENSKY: Yes.

PRIEST: I have just one niece. I have four nephews, and a wonderful family, just the best family.

SERDENSKY: Is there anything else you can think of that would be of interest historically?

PRIEST: **0:35:44.4** I think it's good that this house is being protected in the land trust. I don't know what's going to happen to the furniture inside. I sold the highboy and the butterfly table because I didn't want them to get lost in the shuffle anywhere. I used to have a highboy there. I used to have a butterfly table. But they were—the rest of the things that I have are not fancy antiques, but they were special. I just thought it was good to have them go.

SERDENSKY: To someone you knew?

PRIEST: No. No, I don't even know who bought them? I sold them through somebody else. But it seemed like the best thing to do.

SERDENSKY: And tell me about your cat—your kitty cat.

PRIEST: My cat is a delightful creature. He came from Main Street, from Doris Burgdorf. He's 8 years old, and he is always with me, except when he doesn't go to bed with me. There was a time he used to jump up on the bed at night, but I think he has a broken leg, so he doesn't jump up much.

SERDENSKY: How old is he?

PRIEST: Eight, going on nine. I'm so glad Doris Burgdorf had seen him, since he was a grown-up cat.

SERDENSKY: He sure is grown up.

PRIEST: Yes. He is big, isn't he?

SERDENSKY: He's a very large cat.

PRIEST: He grew, and then he kept on growing, even without a tail.

SERDENSKY: What happened to his tail?

PRIEST: He came that way. That's why his name is Stubby. I have a cousin—second cousin—whom everybody calls Stub. I asked him if he minded if I had—my cat was Stubby. He said he didn't. [Laughs] So Stub comes and sees Stubby.

[0:38:25.7 End of audio]

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