



# The Weston Voices Oral History Project

A Conversation with



Alden O. Sherman

*Interviewed by Arne de Keijzer and Neil Horner  
on May 27, 2015 at his home on Weston Road*

Sponsored by the

**Weston Historical Society**

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The full video as well as this abridged, annotated transcript are archived at the Weston Historical Society and the Weston Public Library and can also be accessed via their respective websites.

The opinions expressed in this interview are Mr. Sherman's alone and do not reflect those of Mr. de Keijzer, Mr. Horner, our sponsors, or the Weston Historical Society.

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# Weston Voices

## A conversation with Alden O. Sherman

May 27, 2015

*[Editor's Note: This transcript has been abridged from the original for clarity and in deference to Mr. Sherman's need to catch his breath at several points. Annotations have been added and are in italics. The full video of interview is available at the Weston Historical Society and the Weston Public Library as well as via their respective website.]*

*It should also be noted that Alden Sherman's daughter, Jane E. Sherman, has written a book about her father titled "Alden Sherman: An American Original", a much more complete recounting of Mr. Sherman's personal and professional life. ]*

**Arne de Keijzer:** Hello, I'm Arne de Keijzer, who, along with my colleague, Neil Horner, represent the Weston Voices Oral History Project, an initiative sponsored by the Weston Historical Society. Today is May 27th, 2015 and we are interviewing Alden O. Sherman at his home on Weston Road.

As we will learn, Alden's mechanical aptitude and his strong entrepreneurial streak showed even in his teens. After a series of ventures -- ranging from selling used cars to delivering gravel -- he built the Alden O. Sherman Company, which became famous for a new way to design and then develop tooling and production for gas turbine aircraft components.

Alden also has become known for his collection of antique cars. He still drives his eight- decade old Bugatti on the streets of Weston.

Alden, thank you for inviting us into your home to have this conversation.

**Neil Horner:** Alden, before you moved to Weston you lived in Westport. I'm curious as to why you made the move up the hill to Weston.

**Alden O. Sherman:** Cheap land. We were looking casually; we were not in any crisis. We lived in a pretty old neighborhood in Westport. In fact there was a trucking company across the street when we had bought it. Anyway, we wanted to get out of there and get in the woods. In those days it was woods here, just country.

**Arne:** You've been here ever since?

**Alden:** 57 years. 60 I guess.

**Neil:** I understand you had a birthday recently. Am I correct?

**Alden:** It was 97, I believe.

**Neil:** Where were you born?

**Alden:** In Rye, New York, at the Port Chester hospital. We moved to Mahopac when I was about two years old, and were there for 20 years or so.

**Neil:** What was your life growing up in Mahopac like?

**Alden:** My father liked animals. He had everything under the sun, and I was afflicted with them. I didn't like animals to that extent. He had a riding academy, a dairy, a kennel facility, raising and selling Irish setters -- although not all at the same time. Plus a chicken house that had about 2,000 chickens. The trouble is they always got sick at the same time. My father was a very impractical man.

**Neil:** You never had any dreams about becoming a farmer, I take it?

**Alden:** Oh, definitely not.

**Neil:** Were you responsible for taking care of the animals?

**Alden:** I was.

**Neil:** And that wasn't an experience you remember and relish.

**Alden:** I used to ride a horse to school. The high school was about six, seven miles away, and the school bus picked me up at about four miles, so I rode a horse to meet the bus. I put the horse in the church shed -- they had a shed for buggies and horses -- and left him there with a pail of water, a bunch of hay. When I got finished at school, I saddled up the horse and rode home.

Eventually, I got a bicycle and then eventually I got a Model T Ford. My uncle gave my grandfather a brand new Ford station wagon, but he couldn't drive, and his wife couldn't drive. After he was scared to keep trying it he gave it to me, so I had wheels on me.

**Neil:** That was a big improvement over the horse. Tell me about your schooling in Mahopac. How many school years did you attend there? Did you finish them all? Did you skip grades? Was that a good experience?

**Alden:** I started out in a rural district school that had all eight grades in one room. I skipped three or four grades. Of course, you couldn't help yourself. You'd sit in school, they called up fifth grade, fourth grade, whatever, and they had their class in the front of the room. There was nothing else to do, so you listen, so you got it all.

I was in trouble all the time. I sat in the back of the room by an open window, and I used to save glass and rocks and things to throw out the window at the rats. Of course, we'd feed the rats, leaving some leftover luncheon meat out there. The rats would come out to get it, and I'd throw a rock at them, or glass or whatever.

**Neil:** You didn't get any grades for hitting rats.

**Alden:** No, no. I only got in trouble, a lot of fights and...

**Neil:** You mentioned that there were eight grades in one school house but you skipped grades. After that where did you go to school? Was it still in Mahopac?

**Alden:** I got out of there finally. The district nurse took pity on me, and the superintendent of the schools for Putnam County got to be a good friend. He encouraged me to get out of that school. Between the two of them they got me into the high school in Lake Mahopac and it was a big step forward.

**Neil:** Some people have said that you have a very strong sense of independence. I don't know where that came from, but is that true?

**Alden:** I wouldn't have the slightest idea.

**Neil:** [laughs] How did that develop?

**Alden:** I didn't like animals. I got away from it as soon as I could, which was almost impossible. And, I liked automobiles, so I would buy and sell automobiles. When I was about sixteen I had about fifteen cars parked on my father's back yard. I had a very good Studebaker that I paid \$2 for.

**Neil:** [laughs] That much?

**Alden:** A very good car. It was just old. I had a trailer and I had a junk business. I'd pick up scrap cars and scrap iron, copper, brass, whatever, and sell it to the big dealer in Mount Kisco. I'd make some money that way. I bought and sold a variety of cars for \$5, \$10 to fix them up and sell them.

**Arne:** That was in the 1930s, I imagine?

**Alden:** Yeah. Of course, a \$5 car then was about the bottom line. It couldn't get much worse. But I would get them running. Somebody would buy it.

**Arne:** How did you develop these mechanical skills? Was it something that you had a native intelligence for?

**Alden:** Yes, it sort of came naturally.

**Arne:** In the '30s, you were finished with animals and you were beginning with cars. Did you leave Mahopac?

**Alden:** I left Mahopac finally and I got a job as night manager of a city service station in New York. I found out later I got the job because my predecessor was shot and killed. Anyway, I didn't get shot.

**Neil:** [laughs]

**Arne:** Obviously not. Well, that is quite a story.

**Alden:** It was, yeah. Lasted about a year, then they closed up the station. I had a couple of cars parked in my back which I sold. I worked for a sculptor.

**Arne:** [Who was it and] what did you do for the sculptor?

**Alden:** It was Jonas, Louis Jonas studios. I went in as sort of a helper and I ended up making the molds and doing the casting. He made a line of African animals, about a foot long, a foot high. He would make the clay model and I would make the molds from it and we would make multiple castings. I got to handle that, mostly.

**Neil:** That was still before the second World War?

**Alden:** Yes.

**Neil:** Was it after that when you got into the interest of the higher complexity of moving parts?

**Alden:** Yeah, I got a job at Remington Arms [in Bridgeport]. I came over to the Westport area. My aunt lived in Westport. I came over to see about getting a job. I didn't make out so hot. I called her up, said "I am in town. Can I come over and see you?" I did. She said "Go to Remington Arms and ask for Mr. Anderson and Mr. Anderson will put you through." I didn't know who Anderson was. Turned out he was the head man, the president of Remington. I did and I got a job. I spent a few months there. It was a hellhole.

**Neil:** What were you involved in at Remington?

**Alden:** I was a trainee on push presses for assembling bullets. They put the shell and the nose and cartridge case in a press. It would go through the cycle and come out finished. I didn't like it very much. I was making \$28 a week, which was pretty good. I quit. I then got a job at a company making transformers. I didn't know anything about transformers. I did whatever I could. I learned pretty fast and soon doubled my pay.

**Neil:** You had both this mechanical aptitude and this entrepreneurial independence, you could learn very quickly.

**Alden:** Yeah.

**Neil:** In 1951, I think it was, you started your own machine tool factory in Norwalk, the Alden Sherman Company. How did that come about?

**Alden:** We went from place to place, making transformers. We finally made electric motors. I had a half interest in that. We ran out of money. We sold half interest, so I ended up with a quarter interest and some money. We went [on] through that company. We bought and sold another company, made transformers, one made motors, across the street, two companies, and back and forth, the usual.

**Neil:** You said "we," did you have a partner at the time?

**Alden:** I had a partner. We started this company. Then we sold the whole thing. Then we got some money together and started another company.

**Neil:** [laughs] What kind of contract work were you doing?

**Alden:** We were making the electric motors and also transformers. We finally ended up making almost a hundred percent motors. We sold motors to K- Part company, which made the Cadillac of phonographs, as well as to other manufacturers. We had a pretty good name, made pretty good stuff. Everything was fine except we didn't have any money.

**Neil:** When did you get into tooling and development of these gas turbine turboprop blades for aircraft?

**Alden:** I went to work for a company in Norwalk and they were a little bit on the crooked side. I finally got thrown out. I started doing contract- work for various manufacturers on my own. I was going around. I'd ask them, what could I bid on?

I ended up, within one mile, with all the work I could handle. I delivered the parts. I kept adding more equipment. I bid all right.

**Neil:** You then also did contract work for Lycoming, *[a major manufacturer of aircraft components at the time]*. That was a big part of your business.

**Alden:** I went to Lycoming to see what I could do. He asked me, what do I know about gas turbines? I said, "What do you want to know?" The people in the office didn't know a damn thing. So I got a contract to make an inlet guide vane for the A- 47 engine. That was one of the very first jets manufactured in any place.

I got this job and I made the tools for it. I made the parts. I got paid quite well. Anyway, I learned very quickly that they didn't know what they were talking about in purchasing. I got pretty well- known up there. I made a point to be there every day.

Excuse me. [Coughs]

I got to know them pretty well at Lycoming. Lycoming was two divisions. One was a production division where they made traditional engines [and the other was] the experimental division that was developing this gas turbine. It was run by Dr. [Anselm] Franz, who was German. He was brought over here after the war by the military and his crew. *[Franz had been the designer of the WWII Junker fighter planes. At Lycoming he headed the team that developed the turbo-shaft engine with machined parts often supplied by Sherman, who had developed a patented, low-cost process for making turbo-jet engine parts. -ed.]*

I got to know him and Dr. [Heinrich] Adenstedt, who was his assistant, pretty well. I'd see them every day. I'd made a point to make a delivery and go in the plant every afternoon. I made a policy of showing my face. Any time they needed a part or had any kind of a crisis or whatever, I was there.

I made very good connections. I knew the Army people who administered the plant. Anyway, anything came up, the first thing they did was call Sherman, which was fine. I made a lot of

money out of that. If they'd have a crisis, I would make a dye or whatever was appropriate, make the parts.

It became a very fast turnaround. I had a three, four people working my plant. Then I kept adding to it. I ended up with about 30 people.

**Arne:** Then you sold the company?

**Alden:** Oh, yeah. It was much, much later. We sold out to AlliedSignal, and they were a bunch of terrible people. Then AlliedSignal sold out to Honeywell who were much worse. They were impossible, so I pretty much severed my relationship.

**Arne:** It became harder and harder to be independent and your own man.

**Alden:** Yeah, yeah. They wanted to run the company for me, so we let them do that.

**Neil:** Let's see. We had Mahopac, New York, Westport, and then you came to Weston. You've been here a long time. You must have made some friends with some I guess real characters that you can speak about and remember.

**Alden:** I moved to Weston before the flood of 1955. The road in front of the house was washed out in the flood. There was a great big gap in the road right out in front of the house, and somebody drove a car into it. The car was completely below the level of the road. It was a terrible mess, a terrible thing.

*[The August, 1955 flood resulted from back-to-back hurricanes and was one of the worst in Connecticut history, affecting a large swatch of the Southwest portion of the state. -ed.]*

I didn't lose anything during the flood. We built this house. It was just about finished, and I lived in Westport. I saw the water rising in the street coming up through the gratings and the drains. I moved my cars up on the hill. I moved everything in the house up, out of the basement. Even put the piano up on two chairs...same piano as I still have out here.

The water came up just a few inches below the first floor, which is about four feet above water level. I didn't move a damn thing. Everybody else left cars and said, "Oh, it won't be anything, eh." The whole neighborhood lost their cars, lost everything, except me.

I went down to the basement before the water started running in. I cut the power to the upstairs. I actually cut it with an ax. I chopped it, cut the power line.

I had a generator which I moved up onto the back porch. I had power and lights all through this business. Everybody else was in the dark. It was embarrassing; we were cooking on an electric stove. [laughs] We did. We did until the owner came around and made us move out, so I moved up to my aunt's house.

**Neil:** That was a very damaging flood for that area.

**Alden:** That was tough, yeah. I had just completed my first building on Lois Street, Norwalk. I had all my stuff from the basement in there. I was operating a business from Lois Street.

**Neil:** Being in Weston for over 60 years, who do you remember in town that you became friends with or you felt really did a service to the town?

**Alden:** I knew Tom Bucky, the doctor. Knew him very well. Still see him. He's up in Ridgefield. I knew Scott Hill [*who did a number of oral histories now in the WHS archives --ed.*]. I was a Board member of the Weston Historical Society then. I didn't know many people. The ones I did know were dead and gone.

**Neil:** Of course today you're very well- known in town for the Alden Sherman Classic Car Show that started in 2012. You're the guiding light for that. How did that come about?

**Alden:** Jim Petty [*also a car collector who, with his wife Wendy, founded and ran a yearly antique car show to benefit the Weston Senior Activities Center. --ed.*] asked me if could he use my name in a car show. I didn't see much sense in that, but anyway, he did. They promoted this car show. They used my name. What the hell, I had nothing else to do.

**Neil:** What of your cars did you show?

**Alden:** I showed a couple of Bugattis. I guess I took them all up there. Two Bugattis, my daughter took her Bugatti. I took the Ferrari. I was going back and forth with my Jaguar. That wasn't in the show but it was parked there.

**Neil:** I understand you picked up those Bugattis at a very good price.

**Alden:** Yeah, I bought two Type 37 race cars which were then selling for several thousand dollars [*in the early '60s, --ed.*]. I bought the two of them for, what was it? How much did I pay for them? Very little in fact, a couple hundred dollars. [*"The New York Times" reported that they were \$550 each --ed.*]

**Neil:** But you put many man- hours of work into each one.

**Alden:** Slowly. I was running a business. That was the main thing. I took them apart and rebuilt them, every piece separately. I got everything done. I sub- contracted some. I got them all finished up. I assembled them. It took me nearly 40 years.

**Neil:** That's a lot of dedication.

**Alden:** It's a slow process. I had other things to contend with.

**Neil:** What do you think your legacy will be? What do you think were the contributions that you are most proud of in terms of product or things you did or anything else that might come to mind?

**Alden:** I originated a lot of stuff in the gas turbine business. I'll probably be remembered for that. It's not very well- known now. Nobody knows what a gas turbine is or who made them or anything about them now, but a good part of my life was spent one way or another with turbines.

**Arne:** You have patents resulting from your work?

**Alden:** Yeah, sure. They're a waste of time.

**Arne:** [laughs]

**Alden:** I had some patents on the gas turbine business. [But] Eldim Corporation, a Dutch concern, opened a plant in Harlem, hired my manager, and [*inaudible 39:16*] friends. [We had the patents but...] they didn't see it that way. They thought it a perfectly legitimate business. Anyway, the patents didn't tell them what they wanted to know.

Fortunately I had foresight enough to not put everything on paper. I knew the business pretty well [in my head]. I kept it pretty much that way, so they did not succeed in anything. In fact, they wanted me to buy them out. I said, "What the hell for? You don't have anything." They had a lot of material and a lot of stuff that they accumulated. They wanted us to buy this, and I didn't want it.

**Arne:** Alden, your headquarters was on Lois Street in Norwalk. [I hear there is a story] about your commuting [in one of your antique cars].

**Alden:** I went back and forth in a Bugatti most of the time. It's only about a 15- minute drive. I also used my Amilcar that I bought in 1938. I still have it and I drove it up until recently. I had it in the car show [*The Alden Sherman Classic*]. My Amilcar is not a quiet car. It makes a lot of noise. This woman in Norwalk had the police wait for me. They gave me a ticket for driving too fast and making a lot of noise and anything else. Ever since then, every time I drive that up that area I shift down and make a lot of noise.

**Neil:** On that note, Alden, we will close by saying thank you. Thank you very much.

*[Mr. Sherman then invited the interviewers and videographer to visit his basement and see his "real love" – a nearly complete machine shop in which he developed the prototypes for many of his innovations. Highlights of that tour is included in the video.]*