



The Weston Voices Oral History Project

Presents

A Conversation with



Paul and Elaine Deysenroth

*Fifty years of living, working, and volunteering
in Weston*

Interviewed on April 19, 2018
by Arne de Keijzer & Karin Giannitti

Sponsored by the Weston Historical Society
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*A video of this interview plus an introductory
"Quick Takes" video are available in the Society's archives
as well as on its website, WestonHistoricalSociety.org.*

*Copies may be found at the Weston Senior Activities
Center and the Weston Public Library as well.*

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Videographer: Richard Frisch



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To visit Paul and Elaine Deysenroth is to enter a home full of warm hospitality and significant memories, many of them centered on having lived, worked, and actively volunteered in Weston since 1964.

Elaine is a descendent of the Morehouse family, a prominent presence in Weston for several centuries. Their land holdings included what is now Blue Spruce Circle and the athletic fields at Morehouse Farm Park. (As a child she remembers sledding there "while my Dad was cutting up the wood for grandma.") In addition to raising two sons, she worked at the previous dry cleaner in town for nearly two decades. She is also an accomplished musician, and regularly plays harp with a group of other women.

Paul's career included twenty-five years as a facilities manager at GE, but is best known around town for his commitment to, in his words, "giving back to the town you live in." He joined the Weston Volunteer Fire Department the year after he and Elaine moved to the house they built on Hillcrest Lane. He also joined Weston's Volunteer Emergency Medical Services, later becoming its chairman and treasurer. In 2016 he was given a Lifetime Achievement Fire/EMS award by President Obama.

Paul played an active role in the town's acquisition of Morehouse Farm Park and the Lachat Farm. Currently chairman of the Historic District Commission, he also remains actively involved with the Weston Historical Society, where he was formerly a Trustee and President.

The couple treasure and nourish their ties to family, church, and community. They also enjoy traveling, and have made three mission trips to Bolivia, of which they remain quite proud.

Asked about the biggest changes they have seen over their five decades in Weston, they cited the tripling of the population, the growth in the size of the houses, and a shift from a town where most people worked in the local area to one where most commute. They also have found a change in the general sense of community. "It's a different atmosphere," Paul says. Adds Elaine, "It's a different time...so we just enjoy remembering what it used to be and remain involved to the degree that we can."

Paul and Elaine Deysenroth were interviewed on April 19, 2018 by Arne de Keijzer and Karin Giannitti. The video of the interview is available on the Society's website (WestonHistoricalSociety.org) under the Oral History tab. This transcript has been edited and annotated for clarity.

Paul, Elaine, thank you so much for inviting us into your home. You each have notable backgrounds. Let's start with some questions for you, Elaine. When and where were you born?

Elaine Deysenroth: I was born in Rowayton, Connecticut on Crest Road in a 1936 Studebaker. [laughter] I had one brother at that time. He had just turned five. My Mom just reached across the seat, grabbed the blanket from my brother, and wrapped me in it. My father turned around, went home, and carried the two of us in the house. [laughter]

What house? And in what year?

At 1 Bittersweet Trail in 1938.

You mentioned one brother. Did you have other brothers and sisters?

I had two sisters. I'm one of four. My brother Ernie, who has passed away, my sister Linda, and my sister Nancy. *[Elaine's maiden name is Albin and her brother Ernie's wife, Judy Albin, was interviewed for a Weston Voices oral history in January, 2016. -Ed.]*

What did your father do, and your mother?

My Dad was involved with lumber a lot of his life. He did work for the Norwalk Company during the war [building air compressors for mining companies]. My Mom [went to a secretarial school in New York City and] was a secretary at first [for the USDA], and then she was a homemaker, a stay-at-home Mom.

Please give us a sense of what your family life was like.

As a family, we did a lot of things together, but they were generally just a dinner together, or evenings together. It wasn't until the early '50s that we had a television, so we would sit around the radio. We listened to Jack Benny, who was wonderful. It was just family time all the time. We were a very close family and enjoyed each other's company. Of course, my brother and other sisters kibitzed a lot, but it was always fun.

What was your favorite subject in school?

I don't know if I had a favorite subject. I think I just enjoyed whatever was being fed to me. [laughter] I did enjoy music. Whenever there was music, I was right on top.

Did you have any friends that you remember well from those school years?

Yes. One friend lived across the street. She lives in Bethel now and we still talk on the phone a lot. We just grew up together. We've known each other since we're about six months old and we're still very much in touch at age 80. I had a lot of other friends as well. We enjoyed bike riding, and playing after school, and just had lots of fun with lots of friends.

Did you at all attend church as a family?

Yes. We attended the First United Methodist Church in South Norwalk as a family. The church family was our second family, I guess you would say.

Did you have an opportunity to use your music in church?

Yes, I did. I sang in the choir and then, as I took up the harp in later years, I used to play that at the services there, too.

What do you remember most fondly about growing up?

I enjoyed growing up. I had a wonderful childhood, lots of friends, and enjoyed little Rowayton. It was a closely-knit community, so we were all one fun family.

How did you and Paul meet?

We grew up together in Rowayton. He was a good friend of my brother's. We were at a party together and started dating after that.

Paul, your turn. When and where were you born?

Paul Deysenroth: I was born at the Norwalk Hospital. At that point in time, my family lived in Darien in a nice, big old house. When I was about three, I'm told, we moved from Darien to Rowayton and lived on Harstrom Place, which is off of McKinley Street. It was a very quaint little village at the time.

We did have neighbors, the Hartogs, which I'll talk more about later, and then the Stevens. The Hartogs had eight children, I think it was, starting with one two years older than me and then going on down to babies.

Maude Stevens, who lived next door, was a piano teacher and played at the local Baptist church. Captain Stevens was a World War II sea captain, along with his brother. I can't remember the brother's name right now, but he ended up becoming the postmaster in town. They both navigated ships through the war zone. Very interesting people.

In what year were you born, and did you have brothers and sisters?

In was born in 1936 and have no brothers or sisters. As they say, I had family next door. They were my family.

What was life like for your family?

My Dad worked at a variety of jobs over his life. He was a truck driver delivering fuel oil for Standard Oil when they used to carry the fuel in 10-gallon cans. Then, he started working for the Rowayton Market. He did a variety of things there. He was a truck driver for a while, delivering groceries. He also did the cashier work at the store.

Do I understand that your father was also a fire chief?

Yeah. Everybody that was able and wasn't in the war belonged to the Fire Department. During the Second World War, the last phase of it, he became fire chief, because nobody else was available to become fire chief. Three or four of them that worked in the store, when a fire alarm came in, they shut the store down and went to the fire. That's just what they did.

He was also responsible for the air raid alarm system. When they had air raid drills at the time -- people don't know about those anymore -- they used to pull the black curtains down, and then he went down and rang the siren on a pole down in the center of Rowayton. When it was over, he rang it again.

Elaine's Dad also was a civil defense warden. We still have the hat, arm band, and staff that he carried and put out at the end of the street when everybody...It was watching out for airplanes coming. [*The staff to which Paul refers is a length of 2x4 that had a plaque on it reading "civil defense warden," -Ed.*]

What were some of your favorite activities growing up?

Let me see. One of the neighbors had a son my age, whose father worked at their father's boatyard, Rowayton Marine Works. One of my favorite things to do in the summer time when I was growing up and until I was able to drive was to be in that boatyard almost all the time. My friend "Bubby," Albert Hartog, was responsible for a whole string of boats, keeping them clean, and bailed out, and things of that nature, so that kept me active.

Did you do a lot of boating yourself?

Row boating. I had a row boat with a motor. That's the extent of our boating, but that was good. I did a lot of fishing, clamming, and things of that nature down there, and some swimming.

Besides the water-related stuff, did you have other hobbies?

I was a Boy Scout for a period of time and then became a Sea Scout, as did Elaine's brother. We had great adventures on weekends. The Sea Scouts owned a whale-boat, a big, old, wooden whale-boat, that took six of us to row. We went on little camping trips out to Little Ram Island, [which was] a very interesting process. We did a lot of bike riding. That was about the biggest recreational thing.

How about you, what were your favorite subjects in school?

I don't remember favorite subjects. I know I had a lot of fun in shop. The teacher ended up being vice principal of Norwalk High School, and he was a shop teacher -- a great guy, but very particular in what you did in shop. One of the things that I liked doing was making of things out of wicker, whatever today they call it, and I got a couple of trays and a couple of baskets. We still have them, hanging around somewhere. Everything else was just regular.

As I grew older and went to high school in Norwalk, it was completely integrated. But then I went to college down in Maryland, which was below the Mason-Dixon Line. I had a new experience going to school there even though things were segregated. In fact, in my last year of college there, they integrated the college. They brought in one black student. It was a great change in my life, to see that, going to places, down there, places where we couldn't go, because we were white, and they had to go to black places.

Was your religious background similar to Elaine's?

It was. Also in the Methodist church, first in Rowayton, and then up to South Norwalk, where we went together. I've been very involved in church over these years. We have now moved up to the Westport Weston United Methodist Church. I've been on various committees, and things like that.

What do you remember most fondly about growing up? Anything in particular?

I think the thing that strikes me still is how close we were as a group. Not particularly the same age, but within one or two years, and we hung around together. We went swimming together, we went boating together, we did things together. Rowayton was a very quiet village, not like it is today. We get on a bike and went wherever; you couldn't get lost. [laughs] You just come back on the same street. But it was fun.

You met Elaine at a party, but you had known of each other before, right?

Yes, because of [Elaine's brother] Ernie. I had been to the house, and things of that nature. I remember Ernie broke his leg, once...

Elaine: Twice. [laughs]

Paul: ... and we were there quite a lot to see him. That's how we got started. I was at college at the time, and Elaine was still in school, but that's how we met.

Paul and Elaine, before we start talking about your marriage and life together in Weston, let's reach back into the history of Elaine's family and its long historical ties to Weston.

Elaine: Right. But first I want to add – Paul made me think about it – that I was a Girl Scout, and I did earn the Curved Bar, which was the highest award at that time -- in '53, I think, perhaps, but in the '50s, at any rate. That was an enjoyable time for me.

Was it an award for anything in particular?

A series of things. The program, back in the '50s, was quite different than the program that is going on now. Both are good, but times change.

How was it so different in the 1950s?

I don't know what the girls do now to earn a Gold Star, or Gold Award, but I had to give certain speeches to certain groups -- that was a big thing -- to help with poise in speaking and being in front of people. It was a real help, as we grew up, to be able to do that. I don't know whether the Girl Scouts teach that part of it now. I did enjoy my time in Girl Scouts.

Also, at about the same time, I developed a relationship with a girl in England. In 1952, Joyce and I became pen pals through a program at school. My name happened to land on her desk in England, and we still remain very close pen pals. We very rarely e-mail. We write to each other.

Have you ever met face to face?

Yes. Finally, in 1990, we met each other for the first time. Between 1952 and 1990 we had never met or spoken to each other. It was all through letters. When we finally met in 1990, what was really interesting was that we were dressed alike. [laughter]

Now there's no way that we could have known this, but when I got off the plane we saw Joyce and George. There was no question in our minds that it was Joyce and George. He did have a sign made up so that we would know who they were. He took the sign and put it aside. [laughter]

Joyce and I hugged each other immediately and only then stepped back and said, "Are you Joyce?" [laughter] Her mother used to say that we were twins born across the pond from each other. We still have a very strong relationship.

That's wonderful.

Absolutely. She's one of four. I'm one of four, and on it goes. She has a brother and two sisters. I have a brother and two sisters. So many things alike. We just enjoy each other's company and rarely talk on the phone but communicate mostly through letters or postcards everywhere we go. If I was to take out my box of letters or postcards and she was to take out hers, we would know where we had gone because we would always send each other a postcard from wherever we are.

Do you have long-term relationships like that, Paul?

Paul: No, not really, other than some of the kids I went to school with. Not so much college but high school. In fact, Walter Dadik, who lived up on Blue Spruce Circle, and I were in the same class when in high school. There's somebody else....

Elaine: Les Wolf.

Paul: Oh, yeah. Les Wolf. He lived up on Blue Spruce, and he and I and Walter were all in the same class. Graduated in 1954.

Elaine, let's go back to your family history as it relates to Weston.

Elaine: Right. My Dad was born in the Georgetown section of Redding, although he used to tell us he was born in Georgetown. One time I was with him, and someone asked him where he was born. He said he was born in Redding. After we got back in the car, I said, "Dad, you told him you were born in Redding." I was quite young. "You told him you were born in Redding, but you were born in Georgetown. That's what you used to tell us." He said, "Yes. I was born in the Georgetown section of Redding. [laughter] No clue what that was all about. [laughter]"

So Dad was born in the Georgetown section of Redding. He's an only child. [In the 1920s] he and his Mom and Dad used to bicycle over to see my great-grandmother and her brother and sister [in the area in Weston that is now Blue Spruce Circle]. Then the three of them moved around a lot and wound up down in Norwalk. Norwalk is where he met my Mom. They settled in Rowayton.

That's how Weston and Rowayton became one unit. [laughs] We used to come up here each Sunday. My Dad took very good care of his grandmother. This would be my great-grandmother. We would come up to just make sure that Grandma had enough firewood in for cooking and for heating.

Occasionally we would bring bits and pieces of food. Maybe a nice ham or something like that, but most of the time they survived on their own that way. I don't remember any animals on the farm. I do have a picture of the farm, which is on the wall over there. It was just a lot of acres to play in. My brother and I used to sail a little wooden boat toy in some of the water that would come down off of the hill.

There were two brothers. There was Ebenezer, and there was David. David had built a house. Ebenezer Morehouse was on the Gold Rush of '49 and was out in California for, I believe, approximately 10 years. Came back and married Nancy Bennett Rowland. Now when you see the name "Rowland," it looks like it should be pronounced Roland. They pronounced it "Rauland."

I have tried to tell our kids, tried to spell it out, so that they would know that it's Rowland and not Roland just to keep the name. Anyway, he married Nancy Bennett Rowland, and they had three children. My Uncle Charles was the first, born in 1861. Then my great-grandmother, Grandma Hill, was born in 1862. Then my Aunt Carrie was born a few years after that.

They all lived happily together in the house. My great-grandmother was married but came back to live in the house later. We all came up every Sunday to make sure Grandma, Aunt Carrie, and Uncle Charles all had enough wood to survive for a week or more.

[For stories about Ebenezer's gold rush days and other family history, see the Judy Albin oral history. Judy was married to Ernie Albin, Elaine's brother. -Ed.]

What period of time was this?

This would be from the time I was born and maybe even a little before. That would be around 1936, or '38. Then my great-grandmother came to live with us in 1949 or '50 or '51, somewhere around in that area. She had broken her hip. The doctor told her she'd never walk again. That was the wrong thing to say to my grandmother. [laughter] She did walk. She did use a cane, but she did walk. She was a feisty, wonderful person. Gentle, lovely, soft-spoken.

What was her name?

Mary Frances Morehouse Hill. My Uncle Charles taught for I don't know how long at the Jarvis Academy. He was also an entrepreneur way ahead of his time. He sold wood for telephone poles, railroad ties, things like that. He had something to do with Valley Forge, but I don't know anything more than that on it.

Was the wood on the family property?

Yes, yes. The Ebenezer Morehouse family owned 200 acres over where Blue Spruce Circle is now. Then, when part of that was sold after my great-grandmother passed away, my Dad kept 55 acres on this, [the East] side [of Newtown Turnpike]. We moved the house, which was on the Blue Spruce Circle side, over across the street. It's next-door now and it is the house where Ernie and Judy lived and raised their three kids.

Roughly when did all this land get divided? In the 1960s?

Let's see. It would have been the late '50s because Grandma died in 1957.

Do you remember anything in particular about your great-grandfather?

No, I did not know him.

So it was your relationship to the Morehouse family that led you and Paul to move to Weston.

Yes. Because my Dad owned this piece of property here on Hillcrest Lane and it looked like a great place to live. At the time, in 1964, I think we were a population of 4,000. It was just a lovely little town, and we have enjoyed it for 50-some-odd years. Very much so enjoyed it. We put down roots right away. [laughs] Well, my roots were already here, but they just went deeper.

Paul: If I can add to what Elaine was saying about her Uncle Charles, being an entrepreneur was that he bought and sold land. Then when he bought the land, he harvested and sold the wood off the land. Then we don't know exactly how many thousands of acres he owned at one point in time, but it was a great deal of land. It had to be because of what he was doing.

Then during the 1930's World's Fair...

Elaine: Oh, yeah. In the '30s there was the World's Fair. Apparently, someone approached him to see if they could have some of the dogwoods that were growing over here. They came and got some dogwood trees for the World's Fair. We can't find any dogwoods now. Perhaps they all died off what was left or, [laughs] they took every one of them. I don't know. Anyway, it was nice that he said yes. I'm sure he was paid for it, but still it was a nice contribution to the World's Fair.

Did you build this house, or was it here?

Elaine: No, we built it.

We gather you and your Dad had to clear a lot of land first.

Elaine: [laughs] Yes.

Paul: This piece up here, in some old pictures you can see that they had high-bush blueberries on this property. There's not a one left right now because they don't last forever. They also raised potatoes up there. We have a picture of her grand-uncle and somebody else sitting up on top of the hill here looking over the valley. Not very good land for growing, but they did.

Too many rocks... Shifting to the topic of Weston as a whole, how has the town changed since you moved here? What was Weston like then compared to now?

Elaine: Well...

Paul: Well...

[laughter]

Elaine: Some of the things that we remember so distinctly, for example, was that there used to be a wonderful department store in the Center. Oh, my goodness. I bought a lot of things in that store. There was a soda fountain and a pharmacy. We'd meet in there and have coffee. That's one of the big changes.

Paul: It really happened continuously.

Elaine: [And then real estate developments.] Where we are now is a development in itself. We were the only house up here for a long period of time. Then my brother and I, of course, were side-by-side here on this. We hated to sell the property, but my two sisters lived out of state and weren't interested in paying the taxes any longer. We did sell all but a few acres. We had four acres, and Ernie and Judy had two acres. [*The development Elaine is referring to is "Singing Oaks." - ed.*]

Paul: I think the biggest change is that the type of people who have moved into Weston is completely different. When we first moved in here, a larger percentage of the people did not commute to the city. Some did, but some didn't. A lot of local entrepreneurs, actors, artists, musicians, etc. It was quite a different mix of people. That might occur today, too, but we don't know it because for some reason people do not like to mix with other people unless they live next-door to each other or something like that. Maybe they like the dog park. I don't know.

Elaine: It used to be more of a community feeling than it is now, which could be because there are so many more houses now. Just with the sale of Blue Spruce Circle, look at how many houses went up there.

From your point of view, are the biggest changes related to social status, economic status, or...?

Paul: Oh, definitely an economic difference. Definitely. We were just talking last night after the session for the Annual Town Budget Meeting. It seems some people don't care if the taxes rise 1.69 percent. Maybe they have enough money to handle themselves. When we first moved in here there were some fairly large homes. Not many. Now the homes probably average around 4,000 square feet. That's fine, but that's just the thing that has happened.

I've been with the fire and EMS long as I've lived here. We go into homes that we've never seen before when I was growing up. The homes in Rowayton were, if they were over a thousand square feet it was a big house. It's quite a different change in social and work-related. A lot of people here right now as far as I can tell are lawyers or financial people. A lot of the people who lived in this town did commute to the city. Still, a lot of them worked locally. A big difference.

Elaine: One of the things that we used to do is lot to socialize with the people up on Blue Spruce, because none of this [area where we live now] was developed. We had big parties all the time. Now I don't even know who lives on Blue Spruce and those neighbors.

Paul: Definitely a change in the social climate.

Tell us about your children.

Paul: We have two boys, Paul III and Peter. Paul is a dairy farmer up in New York State. He also makes Gouda cheese at a plant right on his farm. His wife Gwen and one of their three boys now work the farm with him. Gwen used to be a nurse actively, and then she became a Hospice nurse. That got a little tiring for her, the transportation, because Hospice people have to drive to wherever they're going. She was covering all of Delaware County.

Elaine: Yes. Sometimes it took her an hour to get to a patient. I think being a Hospice nurse you do have to stand back or stand down a little bit. She found that she had to do that, but she's involved in so much. As Paul said, Paul III makes cheese on the farm. He and Gwen make the cheese together. It's definitely a joint effort. They're sold in farmers' markets.

For a while, when Ancona's market was still there [in Branchville], we would bring down the wheels of cheese, the large wheels, and deliver it to them. But that went by the wayside when Ancona's went out of business. *[After being in business for 93 years, the market closed its doors in 2014. The property, which the family continues to own, now has a retail store, a CVS pharmacy, and a liquor store that still carries the family name. -Ed.]*

Peter, our other son, has one son, so we're heavy in boys. [laughter] Our two boys gave us four boys, four grandchildren. Peter and Maria and our two daughter-in-laws are sisters and come from just a lovely, lovely family. Paul has the three boys, and Peter has one boy.

Peter is a funeral director and an organist in a Presbyterian church in Cooperstown. Paul, Peter, Gwen, and Maria live about an hour distant from each other. Gwen, Maria, and Paul see a lot of each other. Weekends are usually pretty hectic for Peter as a funeral director and an organist. He doesn't get to see them as much. He knew that when he went into it. He knew he wanted to go into the funeral business from about the time he was 10 years old.

You talked about socializing with people at Blue Spruce Circle and things like that. What other social connections did you make in Weston over the years? The Fire Department, of course, but also...

Paul: Yes, of course the Fire Department.

Elaine: It used to be that the Fire Department and the EMS squad would get together a lot. They don't do that so much anymore. But back then that was all part of the whole family's social life, too, the Fire Department and the EMS squad.

Paul: We used to have pool parties. I've been in the department over 50 years, so things in the last 25 years changed completely. It's interesting.

One of the things that we find or I find being employed for good number of years, is that I had a lot of business meetings and things like that that took up a lot of my time. Elaine, being a stay-at-home mom, went on a few [of those business] trips with me but...

Elaine: Mostly I was here for the kids. I did work before we had children. I worked for an insurance company, a secretary, or I guess they're called administrative assistants now. I was here with the kids and always here for the kids when they came home.

Then I went to work for the Pokorny's, at Weston Valet, in Weston Center, which is no longer there. I worked for the Pokorny's for 23 years and they were the nicest people to work for, to be around. Just lovely, lovely people. I was very fortunate to have found that great little job, but I was always here for the kids. I'd get through work at 2:30 and was home before they came home.

Paul, did you say that you worked at General Electric, and Remington Rand?

Over my working life I worked for three or four different companies. The major companies I worked for included Remington Rand/UNIVAC. When they decided to move, we did not move with them for various student-related...Where they were going it was not a good place to take your kids as far as education goes.

Then I worked for Homelite, a division of Textron. Same thing happened there. They moved. Then I worked for the State of Connecticut as an EMS coordinator for little over a year...for Ella Grasso [*Governor of Connecticut, 1975-1980. -Ed.*]

I had fun with that project, then got a job with GE. I started with GE Credit, or as they now call it, GE Capital, down in Stamford. I think we figured about nine years down there and then came up to corporate as facilities manager at corporate headquarters in Fairfield. I spent a total of 25 years with GE.

With Rand and UNIVAC and all, were they in Bridgeport or...

No, they were in South Norwalk, in that big building that sits on the hill as you come out of Rowayton into Wilson Avenue there. That's where they were, plus they had four outbuildings. It was a combination of manufacturing and engineering.

First it was Remington Rand, and then they merged with UNIVAC. I worked on a project for UNIVAC down in the Farrell estate in Rowayton, which is now the community center for the village of Rowayton.

It was an old horse stable, a big horse stable. They had two phases of that operation, and they invented the first UNIVAC processor there. Not the actual computer but the processor that worked with that. That was known as Project Bumblebee. Nobody knew what was going on

down there. I could tell you that. I think they had at one time close to 80 draftsmen working on that solely.

About what years were those, Paul?

Let's see. That was...in the middle '60s.

Were you a facilities manager for the other companies as well?

I was not facilities. I was records and retention, dealing a lot with putting things on microfilm. Then doing retention of records primarily, which was so important because they were in the process of buying out other companies at the time to design the computer processing units. That took a lot.

We had units coming in from France and down in Brazil. Nobody knew what was going on. That was [laughs] the answer to any inquiry. [laughter]

The Farrell estate was a large estate. In the estate they had a big house, which had burned once and then built again a lot of years ago.

[Formally called the Rock Ledge Estate, it was built in 1910 by James A. Farrell, who was president of US Steel from 1911-1932. The house burned down in 1913 and was rebuilt entirely in stone. A few years after Farrell's death in 1943, James Rand purchased and built the Sperry Rand Corporation research facilities there.-Ed.]

The task at Univac was to design a computer. I'm losing the term right now, where you design the process that works the unit. This one gentleman locked himself in a room over in the big mansion one night, and he came up with the process. When I went in there the next morning, I was told to go in there and get everything out of there and destroy it because he had reams and reams of paper that he used in designing this process. It finally worked. This thing really kicked off. *[Under the leadership of William B. Wenning, the company produced the world's first working business computer, known as the "409." -Ed.]*

It was interesting work, but it's mostly records retention to start with.

Did you spend any time in the service?

Oh, yeah. When I got out of college, my Mother had a good friend working for the Draft Board. She was in that area, and she knew my Mom from the store she was working in. She said, "Well, when your son graduates, he better decide quickly what he wants to do because he's on the pick list."

We had a friend who was actually a distant relative of mine who was in the mess section there. He was the mess sergeant at the time and knew that they were looking for people to join the National Guard. I was in the Army National Guard for six years. The last three of those I was mess sergeant for the operation.

You still do all the cooking here, Paul?

Yes, most of it.

Oh, how fun.

Paul: Oh, yeah. [laughs]

Elaine: Very fun.

Paul: I've done cooking at both churches we belonged to. It's an interesting process because when we were cooking, we were cooking for menus that were made up for a hundred people. I had a couple of them that I cut down for normal use, but...

What's your specialty?

Right now, barbecuing. Oh, yeah. As soon as it stops raining, we'll start up again.

You mentioned your involvement in the Fire Department, in EMS, the Historical Society, and the Historic District Commission. Anything else?

Elaine: [laughter] No more time.

Paul: Besides church, I've also been on two other commissions before I was on the Historic District Commission. They were just set up for a specific reason. One was the Morehouse house project and what we'd do with that. I also worked on the Commission for a while for the Lachat property, both very interesting, short term. I'm now Chairman of the Historic District Commission. I was Vice-Chairman for...I don't know. I've been doing that for about six or eight years.

Are we correct in thinking that you actually started the EMT service in town?

No, I didn't start the EMTs ... although they think I did. [laughter] When we moved into town, I met the fire chief at the time, Fred Moore, who said, "Are you going to join?"

I said, "Yeah. When do we show up?" [laughs] Because I was already in the Fire Department in Rowayton for about nine years. We called it an ambulance, but it was a little carry-all van that we picked people up with and took them to Norwalk Hospital.

We had First Aid training. When I got up here, I did Advanced First Aid training. That's what we started with. They started the ambulance squad here called the First Aid Squad in 1962. That's when they started it legally. Then a year later they bought their first "ambulance," which was an International carry-all.

That was being delivered the weekend that we moved in here. We used that for a period of time. No, I wasn't an original member but I joined shortly after EMS became active.

Paul, we think people would like to know a little bit more about your involvement with the acquisition and use of the Morehouse and the Lachat properties.

When the town acquired the Morehouse property to make the park out of it, the original house was on that property. When Minerva Morehouse passed and Morehouse Heady passed, the house was in "livable condition." Then it got to the point where some of the powers that be thought, "Well, we'll tear that down" and whatever.

Then we said, "Well, wait a minute. What do you want to tear it down for? It's a usable home." We had all different kinds of processes to make people live there, whether they were fire people, whether they worked for the town. That was turned down. We said, "OK. Well, we want to save the house." We cleaned out the interior and then hired a contractor to put in all new windows.

The roof was in good shape. I can't remember. Well, I don't think we did the roof. Then we had the house repainted. Just for people to know, that color of the paint that's on there now was the original color of the house, whether anybody likes it or not... [laughter] because what we did is we pared back the shingles, found the original color, and matched it. Some people call it peach. It doesn't have a name. It says, "Match that shingle color, please." [laughs] We took it to the place, and they painted it up. It's still a usable house.

It had a lot of internal work, but that house had heating. It had plumbing. It had electricity whereas Ernie's house, the house next-door built by the other brother at the time back there years ago, did not have any of that. When they moved that house across the street, it had no plumbing, no electricity, and no heating. Anyway, not what we know today as heating.

Elaine: That's why we were here every week to make sure Grandma had enough wood for heating and for cooking. She had no indoor plumbing, no electricity.

Why was there such a difference in those two houses, Elaine?

Well, Grandma said it would never work. They put in the next-door neighbor, which was the brother of their dad. There was Ebenezer, and there was David. They were a little more progressive I guess, so they put in heating. It never worked, and the same thing with water. It's just not going to be the thing, so we're not doing it.

Then Grandma came to live with us and didn't know about turning a faucet on. One of us had to be home...

To teach her how to do it?

Well, no. We never taught her. We just did it. We always ran water in the sink for her so she could wash up at night.

Interesting. Now let's move on to the subject of the Lachat property. Paul, did you know Leon Lachat personally?

Yes, I did. Interesting story.

My cousin David's father worked for Nash Engineering, as did Leon. David and I were hunters and Leon gave us permission to hunt deer on his property. That's how I met Leon once or twice. Then when that ambitious conservation plan came up...well, I'll call it a fiasco at the start of the two different phases.

[When Leon Lachat died in 1997, he left his 42-acre working farm on Godfrey Road West, and abutting Devil's Den, to the town of Weston and the Nature Conservancy jointly. Lachat stipulated that the property be used for public and educational use to emphasize Weston's agricultural roots. For its part, the Nature Conservancy came up with an ambitious – and highly controversial--plan to rebuild the home as a large interpretive center, which was rejected by the town. A dual lease agreement was then negotiated in 2011 whereby the Conservancy oversees the wooded area next to its Devil's Den Preserve (about 22.5 acres) and the town is responsible for the front meadow portion of the property (about 19 acres), including

the buildings. A Lachat Town Farm Commission was then appointed to raise the necessary funds for the building's renovation and upkeep. --Ed.]

In the later phase, when it became what we know as the Lachat...That's the way you pronounce that, Lachat. That's the true French Canadian...That's where Leon's family came from, up that way. They decided that, "Well, we're going to keep it."

I worked with Carol Baldwin and the other people, seeing what we could do with the buildings that were on there. Then they raised the money.

I know something about building, and I know people. We did some work down at the Coley House [at the Weston Historical Society] and the barn. I introduced the gentleman that did that work, Dave Jenko, into to the process here. He did all of the foundation work here that needed to be done to save it. It's since been done some more, but just to save it at the time, he worked there.

I was on the committee for the Lachat House. It was a very interesting process to see what was there, what could be saved, and what it's turned into now. They've done a beautiful job. I've been interested in old homes.

Elaine: Again, it was thought to tear that old house down, too. It's really refreshing to see [that it is being renovated instead]. I wish something more could be done with the old Moorehouse house up there. Minerva didn't want the property to be developed into a lot of houses and stuff so she was happy with the idea of putting all the ball fields there. She was very happy about that. That made it nice, so, "What can we do with the house?" would be another nice thing.

Paul: Getting back to the Lachat House, Leon's house, it's a one-of-a-kind, built in the 1700s. If you've never been in there, it has a beautiful fireplace. I mean, a big fireplace, a cooking fireplace. It's huge. That house had been updated over the years. It had heating, it had water, and it had toilet facilities in later years. In fact, I knew who lived there for a period of time. They had an apartment upstairs there. Leon moved to the back building, which was his garage, if you will, made a home there for he and his later wife. He was a very nice gentleman. It's interesting.

We have a gentleman in church who is a nephew of Leon and his wife, Ruth. He has given me some information. We've gotten a lot of things. It's a weird situation. Leon's second wife left to go somewhere and live down where Dennis' brother lives. She got put out of her house or whatever and put stuff on the street. He had known when she was out of there, and he collected all the stuff and then gave it to Dennis. Dennis gave it to me, and I gave it to the house.

Elaine: A lot of milking stools.

Paul: Actually, Leon had a great collection of milking stools and other minor elements and things. We've got one item that we don't know what it is yet. We're going to figure it out. We do know that Leon and his wife and mother made hard cider there. We think this contraption--that's the only thing I can call it--is probably used for doing some distilling.

You mentioned that a lot of people may not know about the Historic District Commission. Please give us a few words on what that is and why people run afoul of it.

Paul: [laughs] In fact, I just had a situation this past week. A gentleman called and said, "Can I meet with you and my lawyer? I just bought a house over on Lyons Plains Road, and, uh, we want to do a little work on the outside, and redoing a garage and very little other work." [The key was that] they're doing work on the outside.

I think it was Samuel Lockwood's house over on Lyons Plains Road. It's beautiful. They're doing some interior work to bring the amenities up a little bit. The working garage, to get to it, you have to go up a very steep angle to go into this little garage which is half-stone and half-wood. It's not very practical. They've worked out a design. Down on the southern corner of the piece is another garage. It's made of cinder blocks. Nobody knows why it was put there or anything.

Elaine: It is in a Historic District.

Paul: Our Historic District Commission is one of many of in the State of Connecticut. and was done in the early '80s, I think. You have to have permission from "x" number of houses if they want to be in an historic district. We have six historic districts in the Town of Weston, one being Weston Center. We have the Den District. We have the Lyons Plains District. We have the Kettle Creek District. [*The additional two are the Norfield Historic District and the Bradley Edge Tool Company District. -Ed.*] This is all done legally and processed through the State of Connecticut. To become a District, you have to get permission.

Lynne Langlois, who was chairman for quite a period of time before I took over two years ago, noted that it takes about a year and a half to two years to get a District formed within an area. It's an awful lot of work that has to go into making an area a District. I won't tell you a horror story about one, but there has been a horror story. I can't tell you what it is. I'd like to, but I can't. It deals with the government, local. [laughs]

Once it's declared a Historic District, it's formalized by the Selectmen in town, signed off and then this Commission happens, of which I happen to be chairman now. Anybody who decides to either change, demolish, or add to a structure that is in the District has to come before the Commission. We are a Commission of five people with alternates. We have a certificate of appropriateness that has to be filed.

Mostly, barring a couple of situations, I'm told, most people know when they're in the district or when they want to make a change because the building department has a note on their cards that it's in a Historic District. Then, it has to go before us.

We've had some good times and some bad times. This deal we're working with right now looks like it's going to work out for the people that just bought the place. They don't have a final design yet, but we talked about what they need to do in order to come to us.

We have a session. It has to be open to the public. We have to post it. It goes in the paper and whatever other means the town wants to do that. Then, we have our meeting scheduled for the first Wednesday of every month. If we do not have an application, unless we're doing election of officers, we don't meet. We just went through one horrible situation a year and a half ago, and we met probably six or eight times. We usually just meet once.

Take a very simple case: Norfield Church was going to put in air conditioning. They came before us because they had to put the air handlers somewhere outside. They gave us a design, showed us where they wanted to put it. We went over it, no big deal.

Another one was the house at the southeast corner of Norfield and Weston Road, the old Banks house that the [St. Francis] church owns now. They were having a problem with their garage. It was in the process of collapsing, so they came before us and asked if we had any problem with them demolishing it.

We don't concern ourselves with the financial aspects. That's the people that are doing its problem. We have a session coming up with the library. A part of the library needs a new roof. We've got to find out what they're talking about. We have the right to approve or disapprove. If they want to put a sheet metal roof on, and it was a wood shingle roof, we probably -- probably -- will not accept it. Has to be as it was.

We're only responsible for the outside, except for painting, of the house or building, and the grounds. If they want to build a stone wall or a red split-rail fence, that's our purview.

Just to be clear, the rules of the historic district commission prevail over local P&Z standards.

Paul: They sure do. Yes, they do.

In your spare time...do you have hobbies or do any recreation?

Paul: Elaine plays...She can talk about her music.

Elaine: I play the harp. I also used to play several other instruments. I took piano lessons. Piano is probably my best instrument. I play violin, clarinet, flute, and then I decided, a few years ago, to take up the harp and I have enjoyed it immensely. It's more of a relaxation thing for me than a performing thing. I do take part in harp ensembles, which six or eight of us get together with our harps. [laughs] It's just lots of fun. If you could sit back and listen to it, it's fun to hear all of the harps all together. I enjoy that.

Other hobbies? Do you collect certain things...?

Elaine: No. Because I took up harp, everybody started giving me harps. [laughs] No, I enjoy old things. I have a lot of from my Mom's side of the family and my Dad's side of the family, I have a lot of things.

One thing that reminded me, when you were talking about Minerva's place over here in the house, when we were little kids, we had this sled that was up here. I guess, probably, it's still in the other house. At any rate, we used to go way up on the hill and slide down through the apple orchards on this sled. Ernie, me, and my little sister at the top. One sled, but three of us.

That was a lot of fun, coming down through there. Some of the fun things we used to do when we were here while my Dad was out in the barn cutting up the wood for grandma... [laughter] I remembered sliding down the hill. That was lots of fun.

Other things?

Paul: When I retired we did a lot of traveling. We've been to, probably, six countries in Europe. We went on mission trips down to Bolivia.

Elaine: That is one thing that we did together that was very meaningful. We still talk about it and remember it very fondly, going down to Bolivia and being with those people down there. It's a beautiful country. Very small, but a beautiful country with beautiful people. We just enjoyed so much being with them and working with them on projects -- mostly, building churches for them.

Paul: They are one of the poorest countries in the world.

Elaine: Yeah. They're lovely people. There is a group that still is in contact, so we hear, from time to time, about how everybody is doing down there, and how the churches are doing that we have built. We did that for three years, three different years.

That was very meaningful, but one other trip we took was to Africa. When Paul decided that he wanted to go to Africa, I went, "Africa? Well, sure. I guess that would be fun." [laughter] It was great. I loved it. I'm a lover of elephants, and to see the elephants in their natural habitat...You know, I've seen them in zoos, and all of that, but to see them in their natural habitat was really a highlight of my life, to see that. That was just beautiful. First one I saw, oh my goodness! I was just so excited.

Then we got to go to Israel, and that was very, very...We really enjoyed that immensely. Very moving. Just lovely. We also went to Italy, and Germany, and just many, many countries.

Back in 1958, I had cycled through nine countries in Europe. That was quite an exciting bike trip. [laughs]

We can imagine.

Elaine: Yeah. I had never ridden an English bike before. When I got to Stratford-on-Avon, I was issued my bike. I said, "Mm, I guess I'd better practice a little bit, because tomorrow the team takes off." [laughs] We just had enough clothes for three days, which I had in our bag. What might be drying off the handlebars of your bike was what we traveled with. I was gone all summer.

Was that a youth group of some sort?

Elaine: It was called the "Student International Travel Association." I traveled with my roommate Evelyn, whose dad was a travel agent [and had proposed it]. Evelyn said, "What do you think?" and I said, "Hey, sounds like fun to me." I cycled from June to September.

Coming back to Weston, are there special events here that you enjoy? Or holidays?

Elaine: The Memorial Day Parade, although it is a little different than it used to be. It used to have a big fair. It was, really, just lovely, really hometown, wonderful things. Now they have the rides and things. I guess the kids really look forward to it and really enjoy it. I'm not sure that they would have had as much fun that we had doing what we did, but this is a different time. We must progress with the times.

We don't hang around so much over at the rides, but we do always go to the parade, of course. Paul's always in the parade. [laughter]

Paul: It's a different atmosphere.

Elaine: It's a different time, so it's harder for us older people to...We just enjoy remembering what it used to be and are involved with what it is now to a degree of what we can do.

Earlier, you asked what do we do in our spare time. Oh, my gosh. I do genealogy work. I really enjoy genealogy work. I have a packet of paper here and a packet of paper there that I'm working on.

As we start to wind up, can you tell us what event or events in your life – family, Weston, US, the world – have had the biggest impact on your lives?

Elaine: For me, I think travel.

Paul: Just general. One of the things as Elaine mentioned before, doing the mission work. We've been to Bolivia three times, but we also do mission work locally. We've worked with Habitat, with United Way projects. It's mission work not only international but also local. Our church is involved in two or three local projects on an ongoing basis. We lack not having enough time as one gets older.

Our first trip that Elaine got to go to Bolivia, the airport is 17,000 feet high. That's the airport you're flying into. Then when you get down to Cochabamba where we lived and worked, it's 8,000 feet high. You're working in a rarefied-air atmosphere.

Elaine: I had a little trouble with the altitude problem at 17,000 feet. Paul didn't seem to have any problem. I got off the plane, and boy. There was just no air to breathe. They took me in a room, put oxygen on me, and 10 minutes later I was ready to go, [laughs] sort of.

[An emergency radio starts squawking in the background...]

Paul: You're hearing all this nonsense in the back. Well, that's either fire or EMS, a call. I have a radio here that announces what they...I have both on. Right now, I'm still an EMT. I'm now a fire police for the Fire Department. As one gets older, one does not want to go into burning buildings like we used to...or things of that nature. As we mentioned earlier, I've been in the Fire Department and EMS ever since I was 16 years old. It just happens. It's just a fact. My good wife here puts up with me. *[Paul retired from EMS a few months after this interview but remains a fire policeman for the Fire Department. –Ed.]*

Elaine: It never has bothered me that he leaves in the middle of everything. It's what he was born to do. He enjoys it. He enjoys the social part of it, too. When he leaves in the middle of dinner or the middle of a party that we might be having here, it's just, "OK."

That's great.

Paul: Thank goodness for microwaves. [laughter]

Elaine: Oh, yeah. [laughter] With Peter, after he graduated from college, he came back to live with us. He was a funeral director. I never knew when. It was just a swinging door here. I'd just, "Oh, bye. Stay safe."

Were you here in '63 when the school burned?

Paul: No, we moved in '64.

Elaine: I always loved that school. When I came up as a child, I'd always refer to it as "my school." Little did I know that I would someday live in this town.

Your talking about the 1960s reminds us that the Historical Society is mounting an exhibition and a series of programs related to life in that decade. So let us ask you, what pops into your head when you think about the '60s?

Paul: I graduated college in '60 and then moved up here in '64. For the event that the Historical Society is having, I said, "Well, we have some things from the '60s. I have an army uniform, a couple of them. We have the kids' toys." I don't know what they've done with them. I haven't seen them because I know we brought two boxes full of toys, toy trucks for the most part.

Elaine: Our kids were very careful with their toys. They were amazing. I don't know. Maybe all kids were, but now I don't know. I think they were built differently. They were built with all metal. Now they're built with all plastic that chips and crack. We have seven great-grandchildren, and we watch what they're playing with.

Back to your memories of the '60s. Were you wearing tie-dye and...

Elaine: No. I was not wearing tie-dye. [laughter]No. I dressed in whatever the style was at the time minus tie-dye. [laughter]

We have covered a lot. Before we close, can you think of any particular challenges that you were proud to have overcome?

Elaine: Well, [laughs] I didn't think that I could possibly do anything down in Bolivia, but I did. I wondered why I was going. God told me I should go, so I did. I thought, "Oh. You have read me all wrong. This is not my dig."

Paul wanted to go, so I said, "Oh, have a wonderful time." God just said, "You're going." What are you going to do? You go. Pack your bags and go. That was a challenge, but I persevered.

Paul: I think one of the things that I would like to see happen somehow is that young men need to have a challenge. Now some of them that have a lot of money get no challenge. I was, as I say, in the National Guard for six years. I watched young men come through.

I was probably older because I'd graduated a little ahead of most of them. They got their lives changed, learned things that they could do on their own. Some of these kids are able to go on these Outward Bound projects. It's good for them. The other day I'm driving in the Center, and there was this young lady driving a Beemer, hers. I could tell it was hers. What do they do?

Now a lot of them are involved in sports, much more than we were at the time. We had our own daily sports we did playing touch football or something like that. A lot of kids are involved in very strenuous sports activities, but that doesn't teach them how to use a screwdriver, how to use a hammer, or how to know when they own a home what they have to do to take care of it.

I see it all the time. A lot of the guys in the firehouse are very handy people. [But] they're far and few between. This is becoming a real problem. Well, now we have what they call a Mister Handyman or whatever that is. I've seen too many that think they are, but they're not. When you build a house that's six or eight thousand square feet and it's taller than most ladders go to, somebody's got to take care of those houses.

One of the things that's good for a lot of them is scouting. Again, it's not the norm for a kid to get into scouting anymore. I know my youngest grandson in about a year now he'll get his Eagle. I

was not fortunate enough to do that, but they need something like that. I don't think the town is providing that. They're providing sports, which is great.

There's the people that do the music, and they do the plays. That's great, but how about the normal things? Everybody used to pooh-pooh them. Well, we had cooking and we had this and we had that. We don't have that anymore. Where are they going to learn this? In my estimation it's not right. They took shop. They took all of these ancillary projects out at school. They're teaching them very well.

They're very well "educated," and they get good jobs. Then, as I say, when they go to own a home, they don't know. It's going to be the downfall I think of a lot of younger people going into the workforce. I know they go and live in the city because they can't stay at home, or they don't want to stay at home. That costs a fortune. It's a different atmosphere.

Any words of wisdom from you, Elaine?

Elaine: Just keep persevering.

Are there questions we should have asked that we didn't ask?

Elaine: No.

Paul: I think one of the questions we were asking ourselves was, why are we being interviewed? We've only been in town 50 years

Because that's a long time to stay in one town and to have been active in town for that long.

Paul: We feel the town turns over about every five to seven years. One of the hardest things we have with both the fire and EMS and we're trying to get around it right now, people still think that we're a paid department or a paid EMS division. When you tell them that it's all volunteer [they are surprised].

There are a lot of other towns in the state of Connecticut that are still all volunteer. New York State is mostly all volunteer except for the big cities. I'm talking about the rural thing. They're volunteers. Volunteerism is happening here, but not the way it used to. Not with the sincerity.

I know we just graduated over the last two years about forty EMTs. I'm not going to say how long they're going to be with us. They spend all this time, and it's about 120 to 150 hours of training, to be one of those.

Same thing with firemen, you know. They have to go through a full course now, which is good. You're doing things you don't normally do. The longevity of their service is minimal, and I don't know why.

Elaine: Some of them move.

Paul: Some of them move, yeah.

Elaine: They get tired of doing it. It's hard work to continually go out in all hours of the night. I can remember Paul going out many nights. He would come in at four or five o'clock in the morning, take an hour's sleep, and go to work. Can't do that now. It doesn't work anymore for us. In the younger days, they worked.

Paul: Yeah.

It's obvious that despite the demands on you, the two of you are still very energetic. Thank you for all that you've done for the town and thank you as well, of course, for doing this interview for the Historical Society's oral history program.

Elaine: Thank you.