

NARRATOR'S NAME: Mr. Elmer Matthews

TAPE NUMBER: #1, Side 1

DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 11, 1986 (at 9:45 AM)

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Mr. Matthew's home on R.D. 3, Chester Springs, Chester
County, PA

INTERVIEWER'S NAME: Dr. John J. Turner, Jr., West Chester University

FOR: French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust Oral History Program

T: Just sit back and relax Mr. Matthews. Mr. Matthews, when and where were you born?

M: My voice is choked up . . . I was born Paoli, Pennsylvania, January the 31st, 1905.

T: When did you move to Chester Springs?

M: I moved to Chester Springs on the 7th of February, 1918.

T: You've lived in this house ever since?

M: No, I lived a neighbor of Collins until 1929. I moved into this house April, 1929.

T: When did you first meet Oliver Collins and his family?

M: In the fall of 1919.

T: In the fall of 1919 . . . what was the occasion of you meeting him?

M: He'd just bought the property then.

T: What was your first impression of Oliver Collins? Remember when you first met him what the circumstances were?

M: Well, the first thing I decided, he was a perfectionist in everything he did or said.

T: You said he was a perfectionist. What made you think he was a perfectionist?

M: Just the manner of ways he did things and the way he described everything. He was so particular. Anything he fixed it was fixed better than when it was new, I might say. There was nothing he couldn't fix, metal or wood, was better than it was new. You had to wait your turns if you wanted somethin' fixed, if you wanted Collins to fix it.

T: He was so busy . . .

M: Yeah, he was so busy. See, he ran the mill, but he had this sideline of bein' a handy mechanic. He's an expert mechanic. He had more tools there than I ever saw in my life.

T: What kind of business did you do with Mr. Collins? What kind of work did you take him?

M: . . . (inaudible) . . . my first experience with him, he put a roof on part of my father's barn. He was a first class carpenter as well as a mechanic. And we didn't grind our feed with him cause my father owned a feed grinder, but he sharpened all our tools. He was an expert on sharpening anything and if we had anything broken on the farm (there was no welding in those days), but he could repair it.

T: When you saw him working at the mill, what are some of the innovations that he made to the mill, some of the changes that he made to the mill over the years that you remember? What were some of the things that he did? You mentioned that he was an expert on gears. What can you tell me about the gears in the mill?

M: He's an expert on makin' these wooden gears. Sometimes they would snap off, but Horace was smart enough to make a new gear, replace the gear, where at some mills, they would have to hire an expert to do that. He was expert

enough to do his own. The waterwheel always had to be started very slowly, cause if it was started with too much speed, it would snap these gears off. That means you would open the gate and let too much water in at one time, that would snap these gears off and then he would have to get some white oak lumber and replace it. I've seen him doing it. All right, I'll tell ya this. One time I recall he was makin' cider down there and his wife was helpin' him . . .

T: His first wife of his second wife?

M: His first wife was helpin' him, he sent his wife in the mill to start the wheel and she just accidentally didn't think and let too much water in, opened the gate too wide and started the wheel with too much speed and it snapped off gears for him. So he had to shut down again and put some more of these wooden cog wheels, cog gears, before he could go on and finish that cider makin' project that he was involved in. I just happened to be there. He wasn't makin' cider for us but . . . (inaudible) . . . has anyone commented about the cider he made?

T: Yeah, tell me about the cider business.

M: Well, back in the . . . during Prohibition, Collins made a lot of cider because people that use alcohol like hard cider around. My father didn't make it but it was a big thing then. I can see people, see that lane of his, horses tied to the fence clean out along 401 waitin' to get waited on. He told me that he could make about 20 barrel a day. He had to grind the apples, it was all water power I understand, and then he pressed the juice out of 'em with this enormous press. This press run very slow, it was geared to run slow, and then the apple juice come out in a large tub there and he

dipped it out with a copper kettle. I don't know why . . . (inaudible) . . . and he'd dip it out and fill the barrel. Fifty gallon barrel they were and then he'd help the farmer load it on the wagon and then another farmer would take his place. That was a big business with him for at least 4 or 5 years I'd say, at least. Maybe longer than that. The cider business was a (inaudible) project. Of course that was only seasonal cause the apples probably wouldn't last more than two months. He has some apples come earlier than others, then there'd be some a little later and then the later apples, and that's how the cider business operated.

T: What can you tell me about the people that used to deal with him? Did he ever complain to you about problems he had with them? Mr. Matthews, how do you explain the decline of the feed grinding business?

M: Well, at that time farmers were buying their own grinders. Most farmers had a stationary gasoline engine and he would attach this feed grinder to the barn floor and through belt power, he would grind his own feed and save takin' it to the mill and haulin' it home again and that seemed to slow his business up.

T: As the feed business began to decline, what began to replace that at the mill?

M: Horace wanted a stationary sawmill and a traction engine to saw lumber there and that became a big business with him, as much as he could handle. Farmers hauled their logs there and then they'd come back in a few days and he'd have the lumber all piled up there and it wasn't long after that, he bought another sawmill and he would come right to your farm with this _____ sawmill, bring his traction engine, saw your lumber right at

the farm. The farm adjoining me, the barn burned down in 1916. Collins was there with his steam engine and his sawmill and sawed out all the lumber to build a barn. There was other barns . . . (inaudible) . . . where it did the same thing. If you were doin' any building project but it was more convenient for you to have . . . I presume he charged more, which I'm sure he did, charged more to operate like that, but it was so much more convenient. You didn't haul all the logs to his place and then turn around and haul 'em all home again.

T: How many men did he have helping him on a project like that?

M: His sons were the only ones that I ever knew that helped him. He fired the boiler with the slab wood that he sawed off there, he didn't have to buy any coal. I can recall lots of times this traction engine had a whistle on and 12 o'clock we'd hear the boys blowin' the whistle. They got a big charge outta blowin' the whistle on this traction engine. Of course, you don't know what a traction engine is, do you?

T: Oh, I've seen tractors.

M: Traction engines. It moves on it's own power.

T: Tell us about the tractor engine. What do you remember about the tractor engine?

M: Maybe some . . . maybe some of my friends are not familiar with a traction engine. A traction engine is an engine I presume would weigh at least 3 ton. It moves with its own power. He drove the sawmill with a long belt. . . . (inaudible) . . .

T: In addition to that sawing that he did, what other changes did he make around the mill?

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M: I think that maybe in later years, in the early 40's, Mr. Collins sold the sawmill to give him more room for his _____ project, cause the cider press was of no use, the apple business was come to a standstill, a lot of the apple trees had been killed by the Japanese Beetles, there was no demand for the cider at that time.

T: Why did demand for cider slacken off?

M: . . . inaudible . . .

T: In other words, Prohibition went out.

M: My dad would make a barrel of cider for vinegar. . . . (inaudible) . . . and then they'd sell this around. That was all underhanded.

T: I understand.

M: But was some people, like my father, . . . (inaudible) . . . I think it only took about 12 or 14 bushels . . . (inaudible) . . .

T: 12 or 14 bushels to make a barrel of _____?

M: I don't want that on there because I'm not sure.

T: Okay, you're not sure but it might have been somewhere in the neighborhood of 12 to 15 bushels.

M: If they were good juicy apples. Some apples were drier than others.

T: He got rid of that . . .

M: That gave him more room for his sewin' (?) project. The building where the cider mill was stored gave him more room for his sewing (?) project. His sewing business kept growing and that gave him more room to operate there.

T: What can you tell me about the influence of the railroad in the area. How important was the railroad to the mill and to the community generally.

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M: That railroad really opened the Pickering Valley up. I don't think he benefited much from the railroad . . . but right close to his house.

T: What did it do for the rest of the people? For example, how did the railroad affect you?

M: Well, the railroad brought us everything. The first train come up the Pickering Valley Railroad in May of 1972 (???) and it opened this country right open. We had market for everything and everything we bought and sold were handled on the railroad.

*This date
seems wrong!
Morris*

T: What kinds . . . Did you ship things on the railroad too?

M: Oh, sure! There was In the 1930's, there was at least four carloads of milk were handled on this railroad, coal, feed, and farmers shipped hay and straw to Philadelphia. There was a great demand for hay and straw in Philadelphia because many of the milkmen and the merchants of Philadelphia were still usin' horses cause I remember them coming to my father's farm and buying baled hay and we'd haul it to Anselma Station and put it on a train there and shipped it to Philadelphia. They hauled as far as from _____ Corner and further cause it's the nearest point here, Anselma was. And we got our coal there. People . . . (inaudible) . . . Anselma at that time was a boomin' town.

T: The milk station was important. What about the station itself? Who ran the station? What when on in the railroad station itself?

M: Well, we had a full-time ticket agent there. Came there in the morning at six o'clock and was there until six o'clock that night. There was a waiting room there that would accommodate 15 or 20 people. We had three

trains a day. Three roundtrips to Phoenixville a day. We got three mails a day on this railroad. Express come in on the railroad as well as freight.

T: What explains the decline of the railroad? How come it went out of business?

M: Well, in the late 30's, the milk trucks took the milk business over from the railroad. I suppose maybe it was cheaper transportation. I can't answer whether it was cheaper or not, but it was more convenient. The milk got into Philadelphia sooner and the train hauled passengers maybe only seven or eight years after the milk went off and the passenger service ceased operatin', although they operated freight for at least 10 or 15 years after that.

T: So you mentioned that the milk business began to change. Did the community begin to change around that time too? Were things beginning to change around here?

M: Inaudible

T: I'll ask you a question. You mentioned that Mr. Collins took very good care of the mill. You also mentioned that he had some sidelines in addition to the ones we've talked about like the cider press and the sawmill. What other sidelines did he have?

M: One of his main sidelines was cuttin' your hair. I don't know how we ever got our hair cut around here. Far and near with the calls to get their hair cut. In the office in the mill, he had a wood stove in there. Of course he didn't have a license, he couldn't set a price, but I'm sure nobody took advantage of him. They paid him a nominal fee.

T: What kind of a chair did he have?

M: He secured a barber chair from I don't know where, but he had a nice barber chair.

T: And people would come and . . .

M: People would come there. You'd wait sometimes.

T: Have to wait? Most of the farmers in the area went to him?

M: Most of the farmers got their hair cut there. Lots of girls went in and got their hair cut.

T: He cut women's hair too?

M: . . . inaudible . . .

T: He cut the hair of men and women in the area? When did he start cutting hair? Do you remember or was it just something he did for a long time?

M: . . . inaudible . . . He cut hair as long as he was able.

T: Exactly where was the barber chair?

M: The barber chair was in his office. The mill had an office in it. He had a nice wood stove in there. It was a very orderly office. You set in the barber chair, he was noted for sharp scissors and he sharpened scissors for everybody else. If you wanted your scissors sharpened, you go to Collins. You want anything sharpened, you go to Collins.

T: Everybody got their equipment and mowers and that . . . You don't know whether he shaved people? But he did cut the hair for men and women in the area.

M: Yeah, the school kids did, but the married women didn't get their hair cut there, but the school kids did. Five girls on the farm join me, the March girls, we went on down and he cut all our hair.

T: You have another story . . .

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M: I can recall that Horace always wore rimless glasses. He was the last person I ever knew to wear rimless glasses although my mother always wore them. In his later years one time, he mislaid them in the mill and he couldn't find them, but he could read just as well without 'em he told me. He was very well read on any subject. He could discuss anything with you. He had super eyesight, that's what I told him one day. What he read was good readin' material. He was very much interested in History always.

T: He read papers, newspapers . . .

M: Newspapers, and he read good books and he had magazines. Anything historical.

T: What do you recall about the post office that was there?

M: The post office was there in the kitchen, right in the kitchen. The post office was right in the kitchen. You walk right in the door and he or his wife were there to serve ya anytime of the day. The mail was carried there by truck from Phoenixville. I don't it would be more than three dozen patrons. Probably he was Postmaster for 20 or 25 years.

T: Do you remember how he got that job? The Postmaster lost it but how did Horace get the job?

M: I think that was a political appointment.

T: You think that was a political appointment? I know that was a political appointment. I know about it I'm just wondering whether you know anymore. In the area, there was a country store. What can you tell me about that country store?

M: It was located right at Anselma Station. It was operated by two brothers, Latchshaw Brothers. I think you could buy most anything in that store but a suit of clothes.

T: Did a lot of people hang around the store?

M: The store was open in the evenings. It was noted for in summertime the farmers would pitch _____, in the winter time, they would play checkers, play hausenpepper.

T: Play what?

M: Cards, play cards in the winter.

T: What kind of game was that you just said? Hausenpepper? How do you spell hausenpepper? You haven't played hausenpepper for about 50 years? How many people went down to play cards in the winter?

M: It would be at least half a dozen people there at the store every evening. I think they'd close maybe around 9:00 or 9:30. I don't think there was much business in the evening, but people would go there to get their mail after the evening meal and spend some social time at the store.

T: Did they have card tables there to play? Did people just sit around a cracker barrel or what?

M: Inaudible

T: Now, the Latchshaw Brothers didn't keep that store forever. What happened when they sold the store? Who took it over and did they run it the same way?

M: After Latchshaw's sold the store, the evening hours ceased, but I think the store was operated much the same. Not to a larger degree. They didn't handle as many different products as Latchshaw did. But at that time,

automobiles were getting more common and people would go to town to buy things that they'd originally bought from Latchshaw Brothers. We always bought our work shoes, our rubbers,

T: What happened to the post office that was there?

M: The post office, when I first knew Anselma, was in the railroad station maybe for 15 years. I don't recall why it was changed, it was transferred to Collins, and it stayed there until Collins retired.

T: I'm going to ask you about the mill race and the pond. What can you tell me about those?

M: When my brothers and I were teenagers, many evenings we skated on Collins' pond. It was a favorite for a lot of young people but we always had a time if we were . . . get home and do our lessons.

T: Did you go swimming there?

M: No.

T: How about fishing? Did anybody fish there? Yes, people fished there, but you didn't? What kind of fish did you catch?

M: Inaudible But we had a storm, Agnes was it, or was it Hazel that washed the dam out?

T: Big storm that washed the dam out?

M: Inaudible . . . but it was very difficult to repair it. We couldn't get in there with a truck. . . Inaudible . . . and he had a diesel motor to run that sawmill, it washed a big hole in the dam . . inaudible . . and water was goin' . . .

T: So that was really the end of the water part of the mill's history?

M: Inaudible

T: It was around what? The 40's or 50's?

M: I think it was in the 50's. I think it was. I remember that the height of it was on a Sunday morning of August the 9th.

T: And it destroyed the dam that was there?

M: It destroyed the dam. Dilworth had a lot of chickens washed down the creek, several thousand. They were out there in chicken coops and chicken coops and all went down the creek.

T: During this heavy storm?

M: During this heavy storm. There was about three foot of water crossing 100 right through the school yard. I can recall the storm.

T: Now Oliver had two sons, Horace and John.

M: Yes, I'd like to say a word about them. They had the same mechanical ability that their father had. They could fix anything just as . . . in the same manner that he would do it. They could . . .

T: They could take something and repair it?

M: They could repair anything. They can repair things that other people wouldn't think of repairing.

T: Just like their father could?

M: Everybody in the community was appreciative of their ability to take their father's place. Now that's

T: You mentioned just a second ago that the family, the Collins family, always had a cow.

M: Yes, I can remember the cow very well. He always tied her around the fields for pasture, but one day she got loose and she walked up the railroad track and the engine was comin' down backwards and the engineer didn't see

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her and he hit her and broke her legs. Collins had someone to slaughter her. Her meat was used for . . . inaudible . . . The engineer and Collins were such good friends. The engineer's name was Tip Hughes and he always felt sorry to kill Collins' cow but the engine was coming backwards and he had no chance, he didn't see her, and Collins had someone come to slaughter the cow and she was taken to a slaughter house. That's as much as I can recall the cow experience.

END OF TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber's Name: Valerie Abu Ghazaleh