

Transcript of an Oral Interview with James DeNormandie Concerning
Past Land Uses of Mt. Misery.

Conducted by Jo Springer, June 16, 1981

JES: Could you please tell me how your family came to acquire the Mt. Misery land?

JDN: Well, we got it just by chance. There was a fellow who was interested in buying it. I knew no good would come of it if he bought it. He was interested in developing it. So I looked into it and found out that we could get it. What happened was that the fellow who owned it had borrowed all the money he could borrow on the place and the fellow that he borrowed from foreclosed in the mortgage on it. He thought that he could get it, but that was the second mortgage and that was when we bought it. This was just the hill, the middle part of the farm, which was in those days, the Snellings farm. It is the middle section of Mt. Misery. It does not include the part as you go down from old Concord Road through the fields or the other side of the brook. We bought up the rest of the land all around it, including the piece that the Adams owned. They owned a piece on the back side. The line went right over the middle of the hill. It was a crazy line, because it literally went over the stone wall on top of the hill and down it. I bought that from Quincy at that time and that included the two lots down near the canoe landing. This was in the late 1940's or early 1950's.

JES: Your intentions then when you bought the land were to preserve it?

JDN: Oh yes. It was also good farm land and we needed the farm

JDN: land for the farm here. We had our cattle at different places, but we had them at the Codman farm for ten years. Then we had them up here also. We finally gave up the Codman lease. So we used the farmland for corn and hay.

JES: Was the hay that you grew there mostly for the consumption of your own cows?

JDN: Well there were times when we raised a lot more than we used and then we would sell it.

JES: Could you please tell me what you know about the well near the old mill site?

JDN: I'm not sure what the whole mill situation was like at that time, but you can see the old course taking the water from the upper pond down to the mill site and that is still there. Everything has sort of been changed around one way or another. The pond itself has been built up. The pond was dry and had been washed out when we first took it over. It must have been dry for a long time, because there were big trees in the bottom of the pond. The well is right where the mill was. The ditch is still there that runs along the bank, just below the road, that brought the water from the pond down to the mill site. There was no road there when we first had the place. There might have been a little road, but we widened it out when we built the pond so that you could get by with a car. If you look at it you can see that the road is dug out.

JES: Along where the path goes now, that was a road?

JDN: Yes, above the brook between the two ponds. That part of the brook was the nicest part of the brook, because it dropped the most. The rest of the brook just meanders along, but then when it hits that part above the lower pond it is a nice

JDN: drop. Above this the brook goes through the fields and swampy areas.

JES: What other roads did you put in?

JDN: Well, the road leading up the back side of the mountain was always there. There were quite a few roads in there.

Quincy's grandfather had made roads on some lands. He got permission from the Snellings to put roads on their land.

All the lands he put roads on were not on his own land.

We completed the road between the two ponds, above the upper pond. One of the things that we wanted to do was to have all of the roads connect in case of fire. That is the reason for having the roads wide enough so that a car could get through. The thing is, if you can get to a fire quickly enough you can control the fire. There have been quite a few bad fires all around here. Now they have good fire fighting equipment and you can get almost anywhere with a good tank of water.

I argue with Russell about leaving the cut brush to decay. It is too exposed to fire hazards. Our woods around here are park woods and anyone who tries to tell you that what we have is a wilderness is not realistic. You do not realize how many people are in these woods. They are everywhere. They are not always skiing or snowshoeing either, some of them are just out walking if it is a light snow. These people caused us considerable worry, because you never knew what was going to happen. There was no way of policing that area.

JES: When did you build the cabin on top of the mountain?

JDN: Around 1952 or 1953.

JES: Do you know when it burned down?

JDN: I was in the legislature at the time. I can't remember.

JES: Did you use it very often?

JDN: Not as much as we hoped to. It had a good fire place there. It was a dandy cabin. It had a nice living room and bedroom area and an outhouse in the woods. The outhouse could still be there for all that I know. I haven't been up there in a long time.

JES: When did you put in the upper and the lower ponds?

JDN: Well, the upper pond had been there. It was the water source for the mill that was down below. Only the dam had washed out. That was one of the first things that we did. We cleared it out. There was a lot of wood in the bottom of the pond. It had washed out at least a hundred years ago, because there were big pines in the bottom that we cleared out. We repaired the pond and put in an overflow. It is amazing how in a big storm how much water comes down through there. It almost washed out once. We had a terrible storm and I went down to see if everything was all right and the water was going over the top of the dam. So we pulled out the plug in the pipe so that we could let the water out of the pond. You can still see it if you look closely at the far end of the dam where it washed over. It eroded the dam.

JES: Do you have clay on the bottom of the pond or anything to hold in the water?

JDN: Oh, no. It is a natural pond. It is a very rocky area around there. I would not be surprised if there was clay down there though. I do not think that the ponds ever dried out. We have emptied the upper pond, but never the lower pond.

JDN: The lower pond was very well built with a good overflow and good emergency spillway so there is no problem with the lower pond. I can not remember if we put in an emergency spillway on the upper pond or not.

JES: Did you have to dig much to build the lower pond?

JDN: Yes, we dug a lot out of there. They used much of the dirt to rebuild new route 117. It worked out very well, because it enabled us to build a deep pond. They had clay and heavy things to build the core of the dam. That is a good dam. It is much better than the upper one. The dam that is there at the upper pond is the old dam. It is just somewhat repaired and raised a little bit. It was in poor shape and had washed out. The part that had washed out is the part where the pipe goes through. It is quite a good size brook really. There are times when there is a lot of water coming down. We sort of fooled around with that dam that is half way down, where the mill was, and we found that the water went through the pipe. We knocked out the wall there.

JES: I noticed a terraced slope that sort of looks like an eroded road alongside of the left hand side of the trail that follows on the left hand side of the pond. Do you know what that was?

JDN: One of the farmers there, you see, there is a little dam about half way up the brook, that's where the mill was, and he piped that water down to his fields and used it to water his fields. I suppose what he really had was a big vegetable garden, because the field wasn't very big. It was the size of the pond. There were ditches coming down from that dam down to the

JDN: fields below, but this was done recently, because of the modern pipes that were there.

JES: Which field are you speaking of where he would have had the garden?

JDN: Well, where the pond is now. That was an open field. It was very light soil down there.

JES: Did you put the two upper ponds in up near St. Annes because of the impact on the water table due to the two upper ponds?

JDN: No, oh no, no. We put those up there because there is a lot of swamp there on the edge and we dug them out in order to get to the ends of the fields so that we could plow them. Both ponds up above, I would guess are not much above the ponds in water level or height. It is a very swampy area and is naturally wet on both sides. We were able to get fairly close to the edge of the pond to plow. In the middle of the nursery there was a big glacial hole there and we tried to dig down to the sandy dirt there underneath it. We just could not get to the bottom. It was just a big hole of mud and it's still there. If you go down to the edge of the brook, where the ponds are you will see it. We hoped to use what we dug out to make the rest of the field solid, because it is fairly low there. That turned out to be a real hole. A tractor could have disappeared in the place. Of course now it is grown up in alders.

JES: Do you know if there were ever cranberries grown in the kettle hole bog that is between the lower pond and route 117, closer to 117 on the way towards route 126?

JDN: Not that I know of, but I would not be surprised if there

JDN: were. There were lots of cranberries grown around town.

JES: Yes, well the bog is ditched, but the ditch runs up hill which does not make much sense.

JDN: The ditch is ten feet above the bottom of the hole, so I do not understand how they used it unless they put a pipe down under and filled it in. They tried to drain it, because the ditch runs straight through to the pond.

JES: I've heard that the bog maintains a fairly stable level year round. Do you know if the bog is spring fed?

JDN: I would say that it is mostly surface water. You see it probably goes down below the level of the pond and I would think that with only a gravel esker between them that the water would just seep through.

JES: There are some stone walls near there also. Do you think that that area was farmed at one time?

JDN: Well, you know there is a stone wall right on top of Mt. Misery. Although, the story of Mt. Misery is that a cow fell off the cliff. There are stone walls all over the place and they go over the hillsides everywhere. The only thing about that though is that there is some old pine there that is still left. The hurricane knocked a lot of it out. I doubt if much was done to that area, although they might have put cows up there, but it is pretty rough land. The north west side of it, that is where the road goes up to the top of the mountain, might have been cleared at one time, because it is a fairly even slope down there. I can see how they might have tried to grow in there, but it must have been very early, because the size of the pines is such that it has been in woods for a long time.

JES: Do you remember if in your time Mt. Misery was ever used as a woodlot?

JDN: No, it was the hurricane that knocked out many of the trees. They did come in and take out the trees that had been blown over in the hurricane, but it had not been forested as a normal operation of healthy wood in years.

JES: What was the purpose of the old barrel that is up in a tree along one of the trails?

JDN: Oh that was nothing. The kids put that up there for a wook duck. Actually it was used by owls.

JES: Have you ever found any Indian remnants on the area?

JDN: No, I have never found any there. But, I wouldn't be surprised if there were some, particularly when you get down towards the river. There might have been sites there. Over in Wayland there was a big Indian ruin that was was run into when an old inn burned down. They later bulldozed the area to put in houses. They dug up everything. It was just raided by everyone.

JES: I have read that most of the Indians lived up near Concord where the fields were better.

JDN: Yes, because if they wanted to grow anything they would use those meadows in Concord. All that land through Concord up to Nine Acre Corner is pretty choice land. It still is.

JES: Getting back to the subject of the ponds, the dam that is at the end of the upper pond that was the old dam, so where did you say the ditch ran down to the fields below?

JDN: It is just below the road that comes up from the parking lot. The road that goes up through the woods there, the ditch

is on that side and it runs up to that little modern dam, I suppose that concrete dam was put in about one hundred years ago or something like that. It couldn't have been put in much later, because there really wasn't anybody to use the place after that. Of course Quincy's grandfather planted all the trees there near the pond.

JES: What do you know of the old Garfield house?

JDN: The old house there was a large colonial house and that burnt down, It was a dandy house, the sort of beautiful house that you would imagine would go with the place. After it burnt down they built a Victorian house there. The second house was built around 1870 or so.

JES: Unless there are any other things that you can think of that might be of interest to me I think that I've asked you all of my questions. Thank you very much for your time.