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Easter, Wendell oral history interview

Mariah Pfeiffer

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Interview with Wendell Easter by Mariah Pfeiffer

Interviewee

Easter, Wendell

Interviewer

Pfeiffer, Mariah

Date

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Place

Rumford, Maine

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Biographical Note

Wendell Easter was born in Dixfield, Maine in 1926 and has spent his whole life in the Rumford area except for a short time in the service. Easter's father worked various jobs, from running a ferry to working on a potato farm. Easter was one of six children in the family; he and his brothers helped their father with the ferry. After returning from the service, Easter bought a saw mill with his brother. They soon sold the mill, and Easter took a job at Rumford's paper mill for thirty years. Easter is now retired, and he works for Rumford's historical society.

Scope and Content Note

This interview covers Easter and family's biographical information; the family's experience river ferrying; Easter's experience in Rumford's paper mill: various jobs he held, applying for work, injuries, changes in technology, work ethic, changing ownership, and pension; Easter's experience at school; Rumford's Historical Society; and changes in downtown Rumford.

General Notes

Easter's voice is sometimes difficult to understand.

ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: If you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little background information, that would be great.

A: Want my name, or do you got that?

Q: Yes, I do.

A: Wendell Easter. I was born in Dixfield. Date?

Q: Yeah, sure, if you'll share that information.

A: February 1926. Lived down to, I don't know, moved over (*unintelligible*) for a while, but I don't know how long I lived there. Then I moved up to Rumford Point. I was there for four years and then had to move, and moved up here on Little Ridge Hill. I was up there for four years.

Q: Is this when you were young?

A: Yeah, when I was up there, I went to school here.

Q: In this building?

A: In this room.

Q: Oh, wow, it's a lot different now.

A: I lived up there for four years, and I had to move. The one that owned the place, whatever work my father did on the place would go in on the rent. Then after a while he was doing too much work on the place and they weren't getting their money out of it. And one winter there wasn't any windows upstairs, and I think there was only a couple windows left downstairs. Had to replace them. So we had to move from there, and went over in Horseshoe Valley, up Roxbury Notch. I was about nine months there, then moved down about three miles to North Rumford. And in '42 moved over on the Ellis River Road, where I'm at now.

Q: On the Ellis. So for how long was your dad doing the ferrying across the river?

A: I think my father started running that in '43, and he run it for thirteen summers. Except for about a month or maybe six weeks, something like that, another fellow would run it. My father was getting tired, and he run it and didn't do a very good job, so my father had to go back on it.

Q: Now, what did your dad do when it wasn't the summer season, what was he doing when it wasn't summer?

A: He'd work around jobs. He'd work for Chester Ladd, some potato farmer, surveyor. He used to work down here to the Center when we moved up here, North Rumford, to where they store is. He worked odd jobs. He never made any big money. And then he went up to Andover Wood Products for a while, up in Andover. That almost did him in.

Q: How come?

A: He worked in the sawmill part in (*unintelligible*). Heavy plank or whatever he had there. Only weighed about a hundred twenty-five, thirty pounds. And they worked around different places, odd jobs. And in the summer he'd go back to running the ferry. As soon as the ice was out of the river, they'd get in and they'd run it til fall.

Q: Now, did you help out with running the ferry?

A: Yeah, sometimes I'd go down there to help him if he had something he had to go do out and about. Right after I got out of the service, my brothers and I bought a (*unintelligible*), lumber sawmill. That was a mistake, but I had to live and learn. Only had that but a couple years, and I sold that and I went into the paper mill down here to work on paper machines for about thirty years.

Q: What was your job in the mill?

A: On a paper machine. You started at the bottom right up to the top, except for foreman and supervisor. They let me go on foreman. I said no, I don't want to do it. He said, how come you don't want to go on as foreman? I said I can't lie fast enough. What do you mean?

Q: So did you enjoy working in the mill?

A: I made good money at it. No matter what job you had you're going to have bad days. But if everybody works together, it's going to be that much better. Sometimes things were going pretty good, but sometimes help above wasn't working with you, they were working against you.

Q: What kind of things do you remember about the river from growing up near it?

A: I didn't have much to do with it. Well, one time when I was going to school years ago, because (*unintelligible*) heard that one of the teachers was going to have a Halloween party right across the river there. I guess I went across this ferry a few times. Not too many times down here, but I did some. And went over there, a fella down there at Derry Cattle. And when we were coming back, I don't know, I guess a cow got out and went across the river. But he brought a cow back across the ferry there, when we was coming back from that Halloween party.

Q: So the ferry was primarily for people, or was it more for automobiles?

A: No, it was for automobiles.

Q: But people could go on it too, and cows.

A: And horses, hay, hay wagons and so forth.

Q: And was that the only way of crossing the river?

A: Oh yeah, from here. They put the bridge in at the point in '55, and that's when they did away with the ferries.

Q: Was your dad still working for the ferries when they did away with them?

A: Yes. Even when they was building the bridge they had him on the ferry. They made a platform up on the ferry so they could get up under the bridge where they was working right there.

Q: That sounds like interesting work. So he was involved with bridge construction as well?

A: No, he wasn't on the construction part, just how they have that ferry and had that platform on it so they could work up what they had to do. And he'd be on it, moving it to where they had to have it.

Q: And what did he do after the ferries were no longer running?

A: Well, he worked for Ladd there, the potato farmer, in the spring cutting seed potatoes. And worked around different places, whatever. Whatever odd jobs he got. He worked for Ladd quite a bit. And he went up there to Wood Products. He had worked up to an old mill, up to the east end before he went on the ferries.

Q: So why did he stop working at the mill?

A: The work was too heavy, and he had a heart attack. And he had to get out of there, and then he retired.

Q: What kind of things do you remember from childhood in the area? You said you went to school right here. What do you remember about the town of Rumford and your life as a child in the area?

A: Well, of course that was right after Depression time and there wasn't too much money going around, and my father never worked or made big money anyways. At that time there was six of us kids. Lived up on Little Red Hill there, and in the wintertime I used to walk horse and sleighs, sleds, and cars could get up there then. A couple families lived above us, one that lived at the end up there. Had a (*Unintelligible*) in the summertime when he could get up through with a car. He'd pick us up and took us down to school. Sometimes, among other things, doing farm work things like that. We walked home. That didn't bother us.

Q: Were there a lot of kids that went to this school?

A: They had two teachers, one down here, one upstairs. And I never went to the teacher upstairs. But they had two or three different teachers downstairs here. And one had pets when my younger brother and I went (*unintelligible*). There was another family that lived right up here, and he's one of the boys that was in my class I guess. We didn't fit in.

Q: Were you mischief makers?

A: I have a slower mind, and one of the other boys' mothers thought he was so smart that he was put ahead in the next grade, and he wasn't. So then another boy, his mother had been a teacher in private, she wanted him to go ahead, and put three in our class. So they put all three of them ahead. The girl made it, she stayed there, she did all right. But the other two didn't.

Q: And most of the people that went to this school lived right around in Rumford Center, or were they living in Rumford Falls too?

A: No, down there they went to (*unintelligible*) Rumford Center, and I lived up to North Rumford. And on this side of the Ellis River, come down here on the other side would go to Rumford Point School. After I moved up to North Rumford I went to Rumford Point, but I went to (*unintelligible*) Valley about nine months and fifth graders (*unintelligible*). It was pretty much a wasted year for me. I mean I had a hard time getting caught back up again.

Q: Because you moved around so much?

A: Yeah. I don't know many had opened school over there, just one teacher. And had seats and desks about this long.

Q: Do you have a first memory of the river at all?

A: Not, not too much until I moved up to the point, and when my father started running the ferry. I've got that.

Q: Are those pleasant memories?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you enjoy helping out on the ferry?

A: Yeah. I run it sometimes. It all depends, because I was working three shifts in the mill. One day when my father was sick I had to run it that night. The next morning my older brother went down to run it. And a (*unintelligible*) with a large truck and tried to go across it, and the pulley block (*unintelligible*) broke. Do you know what a pulley block is?

Q: No.

A: The blocks are usually wooden, and it broke. So I went down and I put another one back up, and that rope broke or something. And the water was high. When it did, the ferry shifted and they took on water, and it got out (*unintelligible*) and it sunk. So my brother started tooting the horn on the truck there and the fella with the trucker got scared and he jumped off. He drowned. Late fall, October or something like that. They found him the next spring (*unintelligible*) to the falls by the dam.

Q: Was that the only time something like that happened?

A: No. Just a little bit after my father running it there was a truck hauling feldspar from a mine up above my place. And the guy had put on too much of a load on there, and he got on the ferry. He come on and put his break on to help let the ferry out, and same thing there. It went too far, it took on water, they got out in the lake and it sunk. But the water wasn't too high then. And the fella said, what are you going to do? And my father said he didn't know what he could do, but he said he wasn't jumping off. And the other fella said he couldn't swim. My father jumped off and swam to shore.

Q: So was it considered dangerous work, or are those strange incidences?

A: They're strange things.

Q: Okay. Generally it's pretty safe?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay, wow.

A: On that truck there that third time, he had on too heavy a load. That feldspar is heavy anyways. But it took on water, made it worse. There was flagpole on the side there. And there's another one over there, and there was a big cable running across the river, all the way across there. And that, on this cable here, it let the ferry go down, if you go to cross you put these back in, down to the bottom, push it along. And it had a motor on it too. And coming the other way, you can do just the same, and then went to the bank over on the other side that they'd keep it graded up so *(unintelligible)* the way the water was up or down.

Q: Now, were they doing log drives on this river at the same time that the ferry's going across?

A: There was pulp coming down there sometimes, but I guess most the time they got the pulp down there earlier *(unintelligible)*. *(Unintelligible)*, but I know one time when some pulp came down *(unintelligible)* ferry.

Q: Oh really. That can't be good for the ferry, right?

A: No.

Q: So did they have to replace the ferry a lot, or just the two times that it sunk?

A: That's the only two times.

Q: Seems like a pretty useful contraption there. Was it pretty widely used, got a lot of traffic?

A: Oh yeah. My father had to stay down Friday and Saturday nights for night traffic coming by. If they're coming from the other side, they'd start tooting their horn and he'd go and get them. We stayed on this side of, a little camp that we stayed in when we stayed on this side of the river. Sometimes in the morning, if somebody came in at six o'clock and want to go across it.

Q: So you camped out right there in case anyone needed to get across?

A: Usually he went down about six o'clock, (*unintelligible*).

Q: It seems like a very different type of work than working in the mill right?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you describe a little bit more about working in the mill from your time there?

A: Well, my older brother and I started the same day. And after we sold the sawmills, went down to put our name in and took the physicals. I didn't have a car then, my brother did. I thought I'd get on the same ship and travel together. And we went down in the personnel office, and (*unintelligible*) on the Number 11 paper machine. I was day foreman on the (*unintelligible*). At that time I think it was the B machine, then they changed to seven (*unintelligible*). But he needed a man up there the next morning, there's an open job, and then go right on steady. It don't make any difference to me because I don't know nothing about the machines whatsoever. I never had seen them before. So the boss, the personnel manager there said they wanted a man up there the next morning. He said if he didn't, he was going to come down and (*unintelligible*), and that fella was bald headed. And so, made the paper is all I know. I never (*unintelligible*). I went right down there and stayed right there all the time on the two machines.

Q: Solid job. Now, your one brother was working there but you said you had six brothers and sisters total. Were they all in the area working?

A: My oldest brother went in the day after we did, a couple days after we did. But he only stayed a couple of years, he didn't like that shift work. He always – there's jobs better on the other side of the fence, so he jumped around quite a bit. And I worked on the Number 7 machine for eighteen years. And on Number 8, I worked there for almost twenty years. I got out on disability. My legs just got so bad I couldn't keep doing it. I tore a cartilage in one knee. I didn't do it in there. The doctor said it was arthritis. There was something in there moving around, and he just didn't follow up on it. And then finally I went to the doctor down to Lewiston. He said, you got trouble with that knee. I said, I know that, that's why I'm coming to you. The cartilage won't show up on X-rays, and they have to inject dye to get a picture of it.

Q: Could they do anything about it?

A: Oh yeah. After I went to Lewiston, they took it out. And that cartilage just broke right off on both ends and was just floating around in there and they took that out. But I had trouble after that and the doctor didn't know how to put a new knee in (*unintelligible*). And finally, after I got out of the mill, because they didn't want to do it til

I was sixty. (*Unintelligible*), so that I could keep pretty active. And back in '92 they did the left knee, put a new knee in.

Q: You're feeling better now?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: That's good.

A: I have no pain there anymore.

Q: That's great to hear. And that injury didn't happen in the mill you said, right?

A: No.

Q: Just wandering around?

A: Back before I got out of the mill, a lot of the things that I got, I have those little battery operated (*unintelligible*) that stand up and work like a sewing machine, pedals on those old sewing machines. And I asked them down in salvage one day if they ever had those come in. They said they had one just a little while before, and a fella (*unintelligible*) bought it. (*Unintelligible*) that day, next day, I see him and I asked what you doing with that (*unintelligible*). So I bought it from him. He said he bought it for fifty- two dollars, so I bought it from him for fifty dollars. And I had it for about the last five months I was in there. Because his locker room was way up in the other end, from the machines. And I'd go back and forth, and you'd up the machine line. And of course when I go down in the basement and check around in the machines, something like that, of course I ended up machine tender. Ad I couldn't do it, couldn't go downstairs with it. And when I got out of the mill I sold it back to the mill for fifty dollars. The foreman said, you should have just charged him hundreds.

Q: Good deal. What kind of changes have you seen in the town of Rumford from the time you were working in the mill up until today?

A: A lot of changes. Machines, (*unintelligible*) brother worked on that, I didn't. (*Unintelligible*), I'm not sure what the three other (*unintelligible*). The one that I was on was the hundred and fifty-five inches.

Q: So like double?

A: Yeah, or two. You know, I think it was a hundred and fifty-five, whoever worked on that one.

Q: So they were upgrading technology since you've left?

A: Yeah. Since I've been out the machines I was on, they've taken them right out, took them right out. One time the foreman, supervisor, they formed a list of repairs to plan on. They needed new posts down underneath the machine there. Everyone looked at it and said, it's a broke post alright. He said, the only thing holding up is your patience. And then they started checking then, and they have to put in one of them steel girders, they did have to put some in. One night the top (*unintelligible*) broke on the machine there and wrapped up around dryer thing. And the dryer got hot, (*unintelligible*), no space between the two dryers. Well, you have never been in a paper mill have you?

Q: No, I haven't.

A: Well, they've got dryers. They had one dryer here, this is another one up there, like that. And then the top felt goes down the top, and that bottom one.

Q: Okay. And it kind of presses it and dries it?

A: Yeah, it dries it. Because the paper goes down around and back up. And in there trying to cut that off, and another fella would go in there and cut some, and I'd go in and get down on the floor, and the boss said get up there and get that felt cut. What, were we the only two working here? When I got done there, I never went under another machine unless I'd go down first aid. When my bottom of my feet were just burning.

Q: Yeah, that sounds tough.

A: Because those dryers are hot, they steam inside the dryers. (*Unintelligible*) all cut out, and then had (*unintelligible*) in other dryers (*unintelligible*). Because we (*unintelligible*) the roll, (*unintelligible*). (*Unintelligible*) down in between the dryers because it (*unintelligible*) rolls. Same thing on the bottom.

Q: What was the social life like in the mill?

A: It was good, but always get some that figured the mill owed them a living whether they worked or not. Most of the time it was pretty good. There was just some of them that were just lazy, didn't get along at work. (*Unintelligible*), I've always worked and did my share. And besides, right now I'm bush hogging fields. Eighty years old.

Q: Out of curiosity, how did you decide to work for the historical society, in this museum?

A: I don't know. I guess it was seven, eight years ago that I joined. I joined, go to

meetings starting next month, once a month. And usually have a short meeting, and have something for programs. Yeah, I guess a two years ago, had that World War II memorial dedication. Then my brother and I went down to Washington to that. And on one meeting after we come back, Bill (*Unintelligible*) did a version of it. There's five of us that had been in World War II that joined (*unintelligible*). They were telling about pictures, something like that, and each time have a different program. And so (*unintelligible*). After that it's no big deal. They're open from I guess July (*unintelligible*). It might have been June since they opened up.

Q: So pretty recently?

A: They just opened outside, that's all. Somebody has to be here. Today is my time.

Q: Today's your day. Do you enjoy working here?

A: It's all right, but I wouldn't be here all the time. No, I don't mind.

Q: What do you see as the role of the history of Rumford today? Do you think people are interested in it.

A: Well, there's quite a few different outfits come in. Some have left. And the mill is nowhere near as big as it used to be because four or five paper machines they've taken out, and it might be more. Right now all they got is Ten, Eleven, Twelve, and then Fifteen, and Nine machine are running beside of me. (*Unintelligible*) and make pulp particularly. (*Unintelligible*) chips you need to for pulp, and then they put it in to sheets and sell it to get the money, good money out of that from some other mill. But that's all they got for machines down there now. You know, I went in once to sign the papers after I got out, and once went and got my watch and I give that to my wife.

Q: But do you have any desire to back to the mill?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: They probably wouldn't even let me. No, but I get that pension check every month.

Q: What do you see as the role of the mill in the town, in Rumford?

A: The role of it, I don't know. That's a main business in Rumford. Except for the stores. If the mill ain't there the stores wouldn't be there, so.

Q: What kind of change have you seen in the town of Rumford?

A: There have been quite a few changes. A lot of different businesses have changed, come and gone. But they got a parking maid there, and if you aren't parked just right, she'll give you a ticket.

Q: I know, I got one.

A: You did, so you know all about that. What did they charge for it?

Q: I think it was ten bucks. So they've changed the parking around in the town?

A: Yeah. They used to have parking meters. They have quite a few (*unintelligible*). But they took them out. But some of them, (*unintelligible*), park right in front of the store or something, and the customers couldn't park there. How'd they change that, cut through the (*unintelligible*) door.

Q: Have you seen the stores change, or the main streets change a lot?

A: Yeah. They got (*Unintelligible*), or something to North Congress Street, by the bank. (*Unintelligible*) maybe once or twice, that's all. When I'm down there I don't stop to sit around.

Q: Yes, do what you got to do.

A: Get my errands done and leave.

Q: Do you go into town a lot?

A: I have to go at least once a week. I went yesterday, because a fellow that used to be barber downtown, he lives up here on the Kimball Road, and I called him last week about getting a haircut. He had his hand operated on so he couldn't use it. Said the last part of this week (*unintelligible*). But you know, (*unintelligible*). He called the other day and said his sister who lives in Pennsylvania was awful bad off, and her son was coming and getting him to take him to Pennsylvania, said he wouldn't be able to do it. So I said well, I can't wait until he gets back from there, I got to get a haircut. Then I have to go get groceries anyways. It used to be four or five times a week I'd be downtown. But not now, not so much.

Q: Why did you go down more in the past than now?

A: Errands, or a friend of mine, she lost her husband and we'd go out to eat and go

places. I've hinted different times about moving up with me, but I had my wife for fifty years. She was diabetic, open heart surgery, and I'm not taking on another one that's high diabetic. And then my son, one day she called him. My son answered and said, my father don't like bossy women. And she's a high diabetic, and she's in a nursing home now. She wouldn't remember whether she took her medicine or insulin or not. And then she ended up in the hospital for a week. And then back a while, one day I was in there, lived in her apartment downtown. And I said, did you take your medicine today? Yeah, I think I took it. And the nurse had been in and filled up the medicine, lined it up for you to take. And well, that day was still in there. And so maybe the nurse that come in that day and took it for that day, but I don't think so. I think they did it for the week, but I'm not sure. Two or three days afterwards anyway, she was in the hospital again. Her daughter called from California, and didn't know who she was just talking to or nothing. The doctor said, well she can't stay at home, and if she don't have anybody to stay with than she's got to go into a nursing home.

End of Side A

Side B

A: And took (*unintelligible*). Sixty-five year certificate this spring.

Q: Oh wow. At the grange?

A: Yes.

Q: Great. What do you get when you've been there for sixty-five years?

A: You've been a member for sixty-five years.

Q: Do they have a party for you or anything?

A: No, they took a picture.

Q: Okay, I think you're right. Great. Well, is there any other memory or story or reflection that you'd like to share about Rumford, or the river in particular?

A: I don't know. We built the roads here along (*unintelligible*). You ever go into Augusta?

Q: I have, yes.

A: The road going from Manchester into Augusta, they ought to do something on that road.

Q: Okay. Good roads are important, huh?

A: (*Unintelligible*) stop people from going into Augusta.

Q: Interesting tactic.

A: That friend that's in a nursing home in Winthrop, I try to go down about every week, but I didn't get down this down this week. So I probably should call her today, tonight. But got a bush hogging field. I got a call this past Monday night about eight o'clock. You ever been up to Andover?

Q: No, I haven't.

A: They got a horse show up there this week. And there was a field that a fella's going to cut for hay and his tractor broke down. And he called me to see I could mow it. I said well, it's three days. I got to fix up the bush hog. And three days I've worked, seventeen and a half hours something like that I've worked. And that's just time (*unintelligible*), not (*unintelligible*).

Q: Do you enjoy working outside?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Got a farmers tan there?

A: And they had that horse show going on this week, and they had to get that field mowed. And so I said well, I had planned on going (*unintelligible*). He was up there for that lawyer Tom (*Unintelligible*). You probably don't know him.

Q: No.

A: But they said that was an emergency that needed to be done, so I finished that up Thursday.

Q: Helping out the neighbors, friends?

A: And I did a small one down in South Rumford (*unintelligible*) yesterday afternoon. A woman called yesterday morning up in Locke Mills. Only can do so much.

Q: That's true, yeah. If you're spending time volunteering, cutting lawns, that's great. It seems like you keep pretty active?

A: Yeah. You got to keep moving, if you don't you're going to rust.

Q: Like the tin man, yeah. Well, is there anything else that you wanted to share, is there any last thing that you wanted to share before I turn this thing off?

A: I didn't even think nothing about William (*Unintelligible*), but I got a picture of this, I guess it's about Maine. A small bear like this under my bird feeder, one had fell down, a little bird feed left in it. And after that I looked out the kitchen window, I see this bear come in here. I took a picture of the first one through the window, and my bird feeder hangs up about five feet and that bear stood right up and pulled that down some and was eating right out of the birdseed.

Q: Oh my goodness. A baby bear?

A: No, no, this was big bear. My feeders are up this high.

Q: Is that common in this area?

A: They come to raid my bird feeders.

Q: I've never seen a bear.

A: Well, somebody I talked to the other day said he'd never seen a bear.

Q: That's pretty cool, they're right in your backyard.

A: (*Unintelligible*) don't have much to eat in the woods, and so now they got berries and things like that. But last year out on the Martin Road, a bear come out and took his garbage can right off the porch, took it up by the woods. I said, he didn't bring it back? No, he didn't.

Q: That's so funny. So they're all around?

A: Yeah. And I had a racoon up on top. I got iron pipe for a clothes line. I had the pipe down, and that wire line. And the racoon climbed up on top of that pole there two different times. I took a picture of that and I got flash back on me from the window there. Got the pole, but didn't get the coon.

Q: Wow, that's crazy. Got a lot of wildlife.

End of Interview
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