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Treamer, Robert oral history interview

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Interview with Robert Treamer by Mariah Pfeiffer

Interviewee

Treamer, Robert

Interviewer

Pfeiffer, Mariah

Date

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Place

Berlin, Maine

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Audiocassette

Biographical Note

Robert Treamer grew up on Carroll Street in Berlin, New Hampshire. Treamer's father worked as a mason in Berlin and Treamer's brothers worked in the Brown Company Mill. Treamer grew up fishing and playing around the Androscoggin north of Berlin. He worked on the river as a young man and then worked as a mason in Berlin for the Brown Company Mill for sixty years. Treamer continues odd masonry jobs in retirement. His two children are both in college.

Scope and Content Note

This interview covers Treamer's childhood activities: hide and seek, fishing on log jams, and neighborhood games; process and practices of river work; Treamer's experience in various jobs: mason, log drive hand, and woodcutter; ice harvesting; fishing: fish stocking and family fishing trips upriver; travel; change and loss in Berlin; the clean water act; the impact of the mill's closing; mill work: working conditions, the role of the union, and pranks; community in Berlin; local bridges; the act of remembering river work; and Treamer's children: their occupations and their relationship to Treamer.

ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: If you could just tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what that was like?

A: I grew up right next to the Brown Company on Carroll Street. Now, that street is gone now, it's all wood and stuff like that.

Q: Okay, so right next to the Brown Company building?

A: Yeah, woodpile. There was a huge woodpile there, so we used to sneak in the woodpile. We weren't supposed to, though.

Q: Were you playing hide and seek or something?

A: I was just a little kid. It was an adventure, climbing up there.

Q: Was that dangerous?

A: It is, (*unintelligible*).

Q: Was your family connected to the Brown Company mill?

A: My brothers worked there.

Q: And what did your parents do for a living?

A: My father was a mason. And I was a mason, too, after I grew up.

Q: Did you follow in his footsteps?

A: Just about.

Q: Now, was Carroll Street and the Brown Company, was that right next to the river?

A: No, way up on the east side.

Q: So, what are some of your earliest memories of the river?

A: Well, we used to fish up there, and usually when you (*unintelligible*) the logs down the river, that's how they got the logs to the mill years ago, they'd jam up and we'd get out on them logs to do the fishing.

Q: You were fishing on the logs?

A: Yeah, and that was dangerous, though, they can always let go.

Q: What do you mean, they could always let go?

A: Like a log jam, we'd get up on that, fishing.

Q: So did anything ever happen, did the log jam ever -?

A: No, we were lucky. We knew just about, I guess, (*unintelligible*).

Q: For how many years did you do that?

A: Oh, about ten, twenty years. Then they stopped driving the river and they all, everything by trucks, like now.

Q: How old were you when you started doing that?

A: Oh, I'd say about ten, twelve years old.

Q: Just about time to get involved in that.

A: Oh yes, it was an adventure.

Q: Did you have friends that would do this too?

A: No, me and my brother always fished together.

Q: That sounds like a lot of fun. What other kind of things do you remember, from growing up right around there?

A: Not much. We used to go ice fishing up above, way up (*unintelligible*). And, well, there was the log drive. Then when I grew up, I used to work what they called a (*name*), that's where you used to pull the wood out of the river, you put them on carriers on cars.

Q: You were working on that?

A: Yes.

Q: What did that involve?

A: Got a couple of guys down there with poles, to pull the (*unintelligible*), get it on the chain. And it would go out, around the drums, and it would come out and drop it into the cars. So I did about every job.

Q: It sounds like it, you said you were a mason as well?

A: I was a mason, yeah. Then as I grew up I stopped and I did just masonry.

Q: What made you stop doing the other?

A: The pole? I was better off, I loved masonry much more. And I worked in your town.

Q: In Lewiston?

A: Worked on that fire station, when they built it.

Q: Doing the masonry work for them?

A: Doing the masonry.

Q: So you got to do some traveling.

A: Oh yes, a little too much.

Q: So, when people used to talk about the river, what kind of things did they say, as you were growing up?

A: Not much, they just talked about the fishing, and they used to cut the ice there, for the sheds, for the ice houses, for the summer. Store it in sheds, big sheds, and they used to (*unintelligible*) around it to keep it from melting too fast.

Q: It sounds like there was a lot of activities surrounding -

A: Oh, there was, a lot of things they did on it.

Q: What other kind of things?

A: Used to hunt and fish, and when I was young I used to go out to (*name*) and cut firewood, a lot of firewood burning then, so used to cut firewood for people.

Q: Could you eat the fish you were catching?

A: Oh yes, yes, trout, hornpout.

Q: Are those fish still up there today?

A: You catch a few. More (*name*) than trout, because (*name*) is stocked now anyway.

Q: Were you fishing above Berlin?

A: Way up on the other side of (*name*).

Q: Did you have a camp up there, or would you just travel up, to go fishing?

A: No, we traveled. One time we had a camp way up in (*name*), then we got rid of that. So then we traveled, it didn't take long to get up there.

Q: You mentioned that you'd seen a lot of change on the river. What kind of change?

A: Oh, there's been a lot of change, like you used to dump wood in the river, and there's no more wood coming down now. So that's a big change. (*Unintelligible*), used to drop some in different places, up in (*name*), they'd flow it down. And that, we used to call the cat, and that's where you separate the wood. Because one side of it, that's why you see all them booms and piers, because one side of the river was Brown Company, and the other side was the International Paper, there was two mills. So we had that, now that's all gone.

Q: How do you feel about how it's changed?

A: I don't know, sometimes I liked it better the old ways.

Q: In what way?

A: Had more to do, more activities and so forth.

Q: Do you still go fishing up there?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Don't catch much though, except stock. I don't care for that. The old trouts were better, the native, they're much better, I like them better than the stock.

Q: How are they different?

A: Seems to me they're more reddish inside, and the stock, it's soft, softer than the other ones.

Q: I've never experienced that. How did you get interested in fishing?

A: Well, my dad and I, when I was a little kid, and kept it up ever since. He used to like to go fishing, he was always up the river. That's where I got interested in it.

Q: Have you been following any of the recent cleanup of the river?

A: No, I haven't.

Q: Do you remember back when the Clean Water Act was passed?

A: I'd say about ten, twelve years ago or so?

Q: I think it was in 1972.

A: It was something like that.

Q: Do you remember that?

A: I know when they passed the bill, yes. Made a lot of change in the mill.

Q: What happened?

A: Had to have these filter (*unintelligible*) and that, and these pollution control things.

Q: And those weren't there before?

A: (*Unintelligible*) the one across the river, and the one in Cascade (*sounds like*), that wasn't there, that was built when this river act came in.

Q: So right in that year they were built?

A: Yeah, they were built.

Q: Have you noticed a lot of change in the river since then?

A: There is a lot of change. The water's cleaner, and it ain't got that foam that used to come in. Don't forget, from Berlin down, you couldn't fish that river, fish weren't no good. And (*unintelligible*), they fish all the way down. Fishing in Shelburne down to (*unintelligible*) there, they're fishing in that. Whether they keep them or not I don't know, but there's fish there now.

Q: Have you done any fishing down there recently?

A: No, I always go up.

Q: How come?

A: I like it better up there, and I'm sure the fish are cleaner, safer to eat.

Q: Even after the mill closed down, they're still safer up there?

A: Oh yeah, but like I say, they could all the way now.

Q: What do you think about the mill closing?

A: I think it's sad, sad for a lot of people, a lot of men. It's too bad. There's a lot of men that depended on that for pay, it was their living. It's like any other plant they close, it's too bad for the people that spent so many years there, figure they're going to retire there, and off they go. So, it's too bad.

Q: It must have made an impact in your brother's life.

A: They're gone now, they've all died, I'm the last one.

Q: I'm sorry to hear that. But I mean, did the mill have a big influence on them while they were working there?

A: Oh yeah, that was their life. They retired there, so.

Q: What kind of things were they doing at the mill?

A: One of them was an oiler, and the other one was a mason, like me. Because when I went back in the mill, I was going to be a mason, I was a mason in there.

Q: What did you build at the mill?

A: We did a lot of repairs. Sometimes we would build substations. We always had to crawl into the boilers, when they were down of course, we had to make repairs to the walls and stuff like that.

Q: And you said you loved that kind of work.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: What was your favorite thing about it?

A: My favorite thing was when there was something new, I liked that. But do repairs in the boilers, I wasn't too, too crazy about it. But I did it.

Q: Why weren't you crazy about it?

A: Some holes you go into, they're pretty tight, stuff like that. You got some passage there, about two or three feet wide, and you have to crawl in there. And it was hot, it was hot (*unintelligible*). Especially in an emergency. When there was an emergency, you'd crawl in there, you didn't stay there two minutes, you had to get out, it was that hot.

Q: Sounds dangerous.

A: It is, it is, a certain amount of danger in it. But it's life, that's what we had to do, it was our living.

Q: What else did you do in your free time besides hunting and fishing?

A: In the free time, find work to do, putter around, do work around the house, cut firewood and so forth. There was always somebody needed help here and there, we'd help each other. People in them days used to help each other a lot.

Q: With what kind of things?

A: Oh, anything that had to be done, you'd do that.

Q: Does that seem a lot different than today?

A: Some places. A lot of guys, they still help each other, people like that.

Q: I've noticed that, being here. I just said, I'll go do this project, and they called me right up. They're willing to help, yeah.

A: That's piles of wood.

Q: Do you remember seeing those all the time?

A: Oh yes, I was brought up – I don't know if there's a picture of the (*unintelligible*). There might be a picture in the pile, that's where I lived, was way back, up on the east side.

Q: That's up towards Milan area?

A: No, it's across the river.

Q: What was your neighborhood like, growing up?

A: Good, I got along good. Because you couldn't start anything there, because there was always somebody ready to fight, I guess. But we got along good.

Q: Were there a lot of other kids in your neighborhood?

A: Quite a few. Oh yeah, there was a whole bunch of them. Of course, we never stayed in our neighborhood all the time anyway, we'd be way up on *(name)* or *(name)* or somewheres else, we were always traveling around.

Q: That sounds like fun.

A: Oh yeah. Now, I try to keep busy, to do a lot of things. Still work.

Q: What do you work as now?

A: Mason.

Q: Still?

A: I don't do too much, though. Very little, because I can't climb too much anymore. This morning, it got so hot I had to quit.

Q: Where were you working this morning?

A: Over on the avenue, I do some work there patching and so forth. So that's mostly now. That's gone. *(Referring to photos.)*

Q: When did that disappear?

A: Oh, about fifteen years ago, they took it down.

Q: Why did they take it down, do you remember?

A: They said it was unsafe, but the darn thing, I don't know, it was pretty solid.

Q: So that's another change that's happened, I guess.

A: Yeah. Now my interest is covered bridges.

Q: You been studying them?

A: Yeah, I study them and collect pictures and postcards. And there was one, that was here in Berlin, in the Berlin mill. That bridge up there, here it is.

Q: Where did that bridge go?

A: That's where the Twelfth Street Bridge is now. Just a little bit above it, maybe twenty-five feet above. You can still see that center pier. Like the trace amount, you know.

Q: How did you get interested in covered bridges?

A: I don't know, I just started and the first thing I knew I was really interested in them, I got quite a few bridge pictures, cards and that.

Q: Are there a lot in this area?

A: Not around here. At one time there was, at one time there was two here in Berlin, there was one in Shelburne, there was one there, there was a couple of them (*unintelligible*), and there was one in (*name*). There was a few, but they're all gone now. But I look at pictures all the time, and I look for traces of where they were. I traced the one that – Berlin had two of them, I found where the other one was.

Q: Where was it?

A: Right down in the mill yard.

Q: So it must not have been there when you were working down there?

A: No, that's been gone for years and years.

Q: What years were you working at the mill?

A: Well, I retired, I worked there about sixteen years. I retired. Some jobs was nasty, but that all goes with work. Some guys used to kick, but what are going to do.

Q: When you say kick, what do you mean?

A: They didn't like the jobs we did. Because it was kind of rough and dirty.

Q: Do you remember anything about the union, the mill workers union?

A: Very little. Never got in any trouble with them, so. (*Unintelligible*) you make the wages and that, that's their job. Try to help the men out. No, I had no cause to go to the union. You do your job and (*unintelligible*). Did you read the article about my friend's daughter?

Q: Well, she had written it? Yeah, it's very interesting.

A: She asked me every question I could think of. A lot of things I can't remember, over the years, it's been so long. Kind of forget it. Years ago, in the mill, that's when I

was pulling the wood out of the river (*unintelligible*), and there I did the poling, did the (*unintelligible*) job, even run the engine. And I ran the chainsaw, because when the long logs would come down and would go in, I had to cut them. So kept a little busy, jumping around.

Q: Sounds like you had a lot of different jobs.

A: So I did all that, she questioned me on all that stuff. Good memories, though.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories?

A: When we used to be loading wood on the ice up there and stuff like that.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? What do you mean?

A: Well, wood used to come in in carts, it was all piled, in a regular boxcar. And in the winter, you couldn't pull out of the river, so you had a thermal bridge, had to throw the wood out of the cars onto the ice, when the ice melted it would fall in and you'd pick it up and put them through a (*unintelligible*) and then into other carts. That's what I liked.

Q: It must have been cold, wasn't it?

A: Oh yes. You work hard enough, cold don't bother you.

Q: That's true, got to get a sweat up, right?

A: Get a good sweat.

Q: So what made that work so fun?

A: It wasn't fun, it was hard work. You had some hard work there, throwing them logs out and that. They were only four foot long, but even so, some of them were heavy. We had quite a time. The guy that did these pictures, Cooper, I worked with him.

Q: Is he a friend of yours?

A: We were sort of friendly, on the job, you know. Guys on the job always tried to stick together as much as they possibly can and it makes it easy all the way around.

Q: So did you have some good camaraderie at the mill?

A: Yeah, we had some (*unintelligible*) too, you know, they used to play tricks.

Q: What kind of tricks?

A: Oh, different tricks, they used to pull different stunts. Sometimes they had a bad one over there, stopped that fast. The guy had a lunch bucket, and they nailed it (*unintelligible*), and he comes to pick it up, he gets just the handle. They stopped that, they told the guys, no more of that. There's a lot to remember, but it takes time to remember a lot of things, you know. Now, I kind of miss all that.

Q: What do you miss about it exactly?

A: Well, the things we used to do. Time went by good. That's about it, I guess.

Q: If you were to describe the role of the river in your life or the life of your family, either your parents or your kids, how would you describe it?

A: I think it was wonderful, we all enjoyed it. On Sunday, that's where we went, out to the river.

Q: Every Sunday?

A: We had a picnic up there and everything, with my parents.

Q: Bringing the whole family?

A: Yeah, the family would go fish, and some would pick blueberries or something, and they had a good time. Now I take my granddaughter once in a while. And my other granddaughter.

Q: Do they enjoy it up there?

A: Yeah, they like (*unintelligible*) fishing.

Q: Did you teach them how to fish?

A: Yeah, rigged them up with poles and everything.

Q: Are they pretty good at it?

A: Yeah, I got one that lives down by Plymouth, she comes home, she's always calling up, I got my limit, I got big trouts. They go hornpouting, went hornpouting this week and got rid of them because they didn't know how to clean them. I said, geez, come up here and I'll clean them for you.

Q: Do they visit up here often?

A: They come whenever they got a chance. They're busy. I got one that's here now because she goes to college. She works at Santa's Storyland.

Q: And are your kids still in the area?

A: My kids? One daughter's here, I have just daughters, the other one lives in York, Maine. And two kids, one goes to Plymouth College and the other one's in Linden (*unintelligible*) College. They're doing all right I guess. They did the dean's list there.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: That's about it, I guess.

Q: Okay, that's all I have for the moment. If there is one other thing that you had to tell me, is there anything else that's on your mind that you'd like to share?

A: No, I told you just about all of it.

Q: Well, thank you, it's been great talking to you.

End of Interview

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