



Williamson Lodge, Number 20  
Wilton & Livermore Falls, Maine

## **Interviews with Four Oddfellows**

August 2006

“I am an Oddfellow. I believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. I believe in friendship, love and truth as the basic guides to the ultimate destiny of all mankind. I believe my home, my church or temple, my lodge, and my community deserve my best work, my modest pride, my earnest faith, and my deepest loyalty, as I perform my duty to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan and as I work with others to build a better world because, in spirit and in truth, I am, and must always be, grateful to my Creator, faithful to my country and fraternal to my fellow man. I am an Oddfellow.” And the way we say that and mean it, it’s more than just words, you know “I’m an Oddfellow”, you think “I am an Oddfellow.” You know, the pride in being an Oddfellow, being a group of men got together for this one reason. I’m an Oddfellow.

~ Lawrence Wilbur, Noble Grand of Williamson Lodge # 20

Next time you're walking through downtown Farmington, take a look at the buildings around you. Carved into stone above doorways and in the brick and mortar of some of the buildings, like many other Maine towns, you might notice the letters 'IOOF' or the word 'Odd Fellows.'

At one time, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) was etched into the fabric of life in many communities across Maine. At its peak in the 1920s, membership in Maine lodges numbered in tens of thousands, and many meetings were standing room only. Since those times, membership in the Oddfellows, like many other fraternal organizations, has dwindled. While lodges in some parts of Maine and beyond are still quite active, other lodges – particularly those in rural areas - have an aging membership, and little interest from possible new members. However, like the letters carved on these buildings, these Oddfellows have left a lasting imprint on the communities they have served.

The first Oddfellows Lodge in Maine was founded on August 25, 1843 in the city of Portland. By the late 1800s, there were lodges throughout Maine, including active lodges in Farmington (Franklin Lodge # 58), Wilton (Williamson Lodge #20), and Livermore Falls (Livermore Falls Lodge # 83). However, over the years, membership in local lodges has dwindled, and initiation of new members has occurred less and less frequently. Some lodges closed due to lack of membership. Eventually, members of the Wilton and Livermore Falls lodges decided to join together, retaining the name of Williamson Lodge #20, and have since worked together to help their communities. This lodge has supported many important organizations and services in western and central Maine communities, including the Odd Fellows' and Rebekahs' Home of Maine, Hospice House of Androscoggin Home Care & Hospice, Auburn Food Bank, Wilton Blueberry Festival, and the Ellen F. Washburn Nurses Training Award. The Lodge has also provided important support for Franklin Memorial Hospital in Farmington in order to help meet the most basic needs of fellow community members by supporting local ambulance services, sponsoring hospital recovery rooms, and making significant contributions to the Ben Franklin Center Library at Franklin Memorial, a resource center for patients, providers, and the general community.

The Oddfellows was founded as a fraternal organization in seventeenth century England. Paul Washburn, treasurer for Williamson Lodge and Odd Fellow since 1955, explains, "the name 'Oddfellows,' from what I have picked up and heard, started in England, and it was primarily working class people who wanted to associate and...meet together. And part of their order at that time was to help their fellow man, as it states [in the valediction], to visit the sick, bury the dead, and educate the orphan. And that was something new...that a group of men would do those things, and the general public thought that they were odd. And that was the designation of Odd Fellows."

This 'odd' fraternal group first arrived in the United States in 1819, when the first American lodge was founded in Maryland. True to its origins, the group remained committed to helping others. Oddfellows in this area and beyond have devoted



themselves to helping fellow Oddfellows or community members when they needed it most. Paul explains “Originally, before we had all the benefits that we do now – social security, unemployment insurance, workmen’s comp, and so forth – the Oddfellows, many lodges had what they called sick benefits. And if a member was sick or got hurt, then the lodge would pay a weekly benefit until they were able to return to work.” The group also provided help to community members who had nowhere else to turn. Benjamin Welch, secretary for Williamson Lodge says, “After the Civil War there were a lot of widows, a lot of orphans, course there was nobody to take care of them except the groups.” In these days, the Odd Fellows would step in to pay medical bills, funeral expenses, and other costs when no one else could.

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*It’s for the betterment of the people belonging to it and also the community.*

Gene Judkins

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Of course, for its members, the group offers benefits beyond this valued opportunity to help others. Between the four of them, the Oddfellows who participated in the following oral history project have lived over a century and a half of Oddfellowship. Each joined at different times in their lives when they were invited by friends or recruited by a coworker, and each has been an active member ever since. Meetings provided an opportunity to meet with friends and a chance for a social evening. Benjamin explains, “We’d have suppers, and play jokes on one another...Everybody was friendly, it was a good group of guys.”

But the desire to help others, Benjamin notes, is the common thread that holds the group together, since “everybody wanted to help...everyone had a kind heart, let’s put it that way. That’s why I liked the group, that’s why they’re such a bunch of nice guys, because

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*I still have these brothers that I can call and they support me 100 percent, it’s unbelievable.*

Lawrence Wilbur

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they like to help people.” This camaraderie pulled groups of people together who might not have otherwise met socially. Paul explains that “Some of them are everyday workers, and when I joined we had many professional people. We had doctors, lawyers, funeral directors who members of the lodge.” These men would get together to initiate new members, perform a degree, and vote to assist, and would also play cards, socialize, and have a supper together. As Lawrence Wilbur, Noble Grand for Williamson Lodge remembers, “going to the lodge meetings, and it didn’t matter if the Oddfellow was one of the head cahunas in town, or he was a bank president or he

was a chaplain or minister or he was just a farmer. When they went in the Oddfellows Hall, they [were] all the same, they all wore the same shirt, they [were] Oddfellows.”

Today, the role of the Oddfellows is quite different. In many ways, people simply do not need help in the same way they used to. Where community members in need once depended on help from neighbors or groups like the Oddfellows, programs like social security or unemployment insurance are now available. And where once an evening at an Oddfellows meeting was a valued social occasion, many people now prefer to entertain themselves in other ways. Many Oddfellows blame this on television and other trappings



of the modern world. Paul explains, “Before television it was much of their relaxation and entertainment [...] we always blame it on television. I think if, a person comes home from work, a little bit tired, rather than go out, especially if it’s a stormy night, turn on the television and watch a program. I think that is one factor that has made a big difference.” Gene Judkins remarks, “It’s a faster paced world today. So many sporting events and things to go to.”

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*The Oddfellows are still the same, you know, the same brothers. Of course, we’re older now...*

Lawrence Wilbur

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Whatever the reason, the Odd Fellows at the Williamson Lodge are getting older. Benjamin Welch, their most recent member, was inducted 25 years ago. And yet, even today, as membership continues to decline, speak to these men about Oddfellowship, and you’ll see a smile at the memory of suppers and meetings, or hear a laugh about a trip to a neighboring lodge or a joke played

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*[W]ell I’m very proud to be an Oddfellow. I don’t wear it on my sleeve, but I certainly don’t hide it. It’s just a great feeling to know that you belong to a group that can help people...*

Gene Judkins

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on brothers. You may also hear some profound words about the pride they have found in Oddfellowship, and about how being a part of this group has forever changed the way they see themselves. As Lawrence explains, “I’m not just Lawrence Wilbur anymore, I’m Lawrence Wilbur – I’m an Oddfellow. And I plan to talk and act accordingly, you know, thinking when I do something, I’m an Oddfellow, this is the way I do it, this is the way I think.”

While Oddfellowship in western Maine is dwindling after years of activity, its legacy and spirit remain.

This devotion to caring for your neighbor, and to taking care of your own as well as those who have nowhere else to turn is evident in many small Maine communities. This is part of what makes our state so special.

In 2006, Franklin Memorial Hospital embarked on an oral history project to capture the stories of remaining Odd Fellows, and to recognize their accomplishments in the community. These are their stories.



Interviewee: Lawrence Wilbur  
Interviewer: Emily Brostek  
Date: 8/16/06  
Place: Healthy Community Coalition, East Wilton

Emily Brostek: This is Wednesday, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2006, and I'm in Wilton, Maine at the Healthy Community Coalition with Lawrence Wilbur and we're going to talk about his experiences as an Oddfellow. So Larry, what can you tell me – tell me about the Oddfellows.

Lawrence Wilbur: The Oddfellows the way I understand it is a bunch of – group of men that got together years ago. You know, 200 years ago there was not much going on, so for the men to get to meet periodically to help and assist each other, and other people in the community, they formed this group, and it was named the Oddfellows because people around there thought it was odd that a bunch of men would just get together to assist themselves and the community.

EB: So I have a card here that you brought that has the valediction for the Oddfellows.

LW: The valediction for the Oddfellows is – I don't know who wrote it, but all of the Oddfellows in every lodge everywhere learn by heart this valediction. Do you want to read it? Or do you want me to?

EB: Do you want to read it? Could you read it?

LW: (*reading*) I am an Oddfellow. I believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. I believe in friendship, love and truth as the basic guides to the ultimate destiny of all mankind. I believe my home, my church or temple, my lodge, and my community deserve my best work, my modest pride, my earnest faith, and my deepest loyalty, as I perform my duty to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan and as I work with others to build a better world because, in spirit and in truth, I am, and must always be, grateful to my Creator, faithful to my country and fraternal to my fellow man. I am an Oddfellow. (*stops reading*). And the way we say that and mean it, it's more than just words, you know "I'm an Oddfellow", you think I *am* an Oddfellow. You know, the pride in being an Oddfellow, being a group of men got together for this one reason. I'm an Oddfellow.

EB: So what does the valediction mean to you? You say that it's not just words that you say, it really has a lot more to do with what you do as Oddfellows and in your whole life, can you talk more about that?

LW: What we do as Oddfellows. Of course it was sometimes party time, you know, get together, social, but it was also meant to be what the words in the valediction said, you know to assist and help. As the years go by and the group got smaller, we can't do all of that. The technology and everything's caught up with us so all of the people don't need



help like they did then. So now basically what we do is help by giving donations, you know like that. And so the Oddfellowship has changed in that respect.

EB: Can you talk a little bit more about what helping used to mean for the Oddfellows, what kind of help you used to provide in the community?

LW: Back when I joined – I’ve been 58 years an Oddfellow – we did more, we assisted the poor families, we donated money to people that needed help. You know, basically we couldn’t help physically but we could help maybe emotionally and with money donation, not a lot because we was just a poor bunch of guys got together to assist.

EB: So it was mostly giving money and then doing what you can to help people out.

LW: Yes, donations and, you know like I said, relieve the distressed and bury the dead, and – you know, help by donating, mostly.

EB: So you said you’d been an Oddfellow for how long?

LW: 58 years now.

EB: How did you become an Oddfellow, you did you get involved?

LW: Well, when I was a kid, my dad was an Oddfellow and my uncle was an Oddfellow, and – it always was secretive, you know, it was mysterious to be an Oddfellow. They both took so much pride in just being an Oddfellow, you know, ‘I am an Oddfellow.’ And as I got older, and when I could, my brother and my brother-in-law also had joined the lodge, and so naturally I joined also. More out of curiosity than anything.

EB: Do you know why – you said your father was a member, do you know why he joined? Was it the same kind of reason?

LW: I don’t have a clue. I was too small to realize Oddfellowship when my dad died, so I never talked to him about Oddfellows, but my uncle, he was still an Oddfellow as I joined. It meant basically the same to him as every Oddfellow. I think you’ll get the same answers, you know, from the Oddfellows, I’ll be interested to hear the recordings when you get done.

EB: Can you tell me about the other Oddfellows that you’ve met throughout the years? What are they like, is there anything that –

LW: I noticed over the years as being an Oddfellow, going to the lodge meetings, and it didn’t matter if the Oddfellows was one of the head cahunas in town, or he was a bank president or he was a chaplain or minister or he was just a farmer. When they went in the Oddfellows Hall, they was all the same, they all wore the same shirt, they was Oddfellows.



EB: Are there any characteristics that you think that most Oddfellows have, anything that they embody or something that shows up in the way that they act that you've noticed?

LW: As near as I can think about that, is the pride in being an Oddfellows, the pride in knowing we have done what we have done.

EB: So what do you think the Oddfellows, in Wilton and Livermore Falls, what do you think they've contributed to their community, what do you think the relationship the Oddfellows have with this community is?

LW: Basically it goes back to helping, donating, you know the little projects. We donate to the nurses training program, we donate to the schools, you know, local scholarships, little programs like the red schoolhouse over here wanted to move and they needed help, we donated money to assist them in financing moving, little projects like that that needed help. A sick brother, you know, a poor brother, his family dying or him dying, we assist them not a great lot, but we do little things like that. I don't know if it's recorded, but it's there.

EB: So, you've talked a lot about what the Oddfellows do for the community. What do you think the things that you've done as an Oddfellow have done for you, what has it added to your life?

LW: After I was an Oddfellow for a year or two, you know, went through the degrees and got to be an Oddfellow, and see how they acted and what they did, it adds something to who you are. You're not just – I'm not just Lawrence Wilbur anymore, I'm Lawrence Wilbur - I'm an Oddfellow. And I plan to talk and act accordingly, you know, thinking when I do something, I'm an Oddfellow, this is the way I do it, this is the way I think.

EB: So it's changed the way that you see yourself in some ways.

LW: Yes exactly. I see myself as more than just Lawrence Wilbur, laborer or whatever. I see myself as – I happen to be the Noble Grand of the lodge, and there's a lot of pride in being in a group like the group of Oddfellows we have here. It's enriched my life a lot.

EB: So you've talked already a little bit about how the Oddfellows have changed from when you started. Can you talk a little more about that? How have the Oddfellows changed over the years?

LW: The Oddfellows are still the same, you know, the same brothers. Of course we're older now, but when I joined 58 years ago, I don't know what year it was, 1948 I guess, there was maybe 200 Oddfellows in the Wilton Lodge, and maybe not quite so many but a lot in Livermore Falls. And as we visited, we would fill a hall with, you know, with Oddfellows, 50, 75 or 100 members to a meeting. Well we've gone from that down to, I think I have 16 members now, and half of them are unable to attend the meetings. You know, we're old. Basically that's been the change. We can't have suppers like we used to, or social events. We used to invite the Rebekahs, we used to invite the wives and, you



know, have social evenings, but with maybe 4 or 5 Oddfellows coming to the meeting, it's changed immensely.

EB: Can you talk a little bit more about those meetings, back when there were 75 or 100 Oddfellows filling the hall, what were those like?

LW: Oh, basically a meeting like that, we would confer a degree. An Oddfellow degree was really something to see. The parts were learned well, and we had – we dressed the part that we acted in the degrees. It was impressive, you know, the degree of love and fellowship, and, you know, one degree the Good Samaritan was reenacted. We would fill the hall. Also we would visit other lodges that specialized in different degrees. You know, you go to Philips, and they did the second degree. They did it well. That's the one degree. If they wanted someone to work the first degree, they'd visit Livermore, because Livermore specialized. And it was a social evening, you know, a nice banquet before the meeting, and then the degree and the meeting and talks from some of the dignitaries. It was a fun evening.

EB: Can you tell a little bit more about the degrees? So Livermore specialized in the first degree, what did that mean?

LW: I don't understand what you're asking.

EB: Can you talk a little bit more about what the degrees were and what they meant?

LW: Basically it was a teaching. Of course the initiatory degree was initiating you into, from now on you're going to go three degrees to be a, you know, a third degree Oddfellows, which you had to be back then. And the first degree was friendship, the degree taught friendship and love and truth. It was reenacted that way. To tell you more about what the degree was – they're really not secret, in that everybody knows, you know. The pride in being an Oddfellow also is, I know what a second degree is, and you don't.

EB: Oh, I see.

LW: That just makes me feel like I know something you don't. It's no big secret, it's the Good Samaritan. And everybody knows what a Good Samaritan is. So the teaching of the degrees followed along, you know friendship, love, and truth.

EB: So what degree do you have as an Oddfellow?

LW: To be an Oddfellows then, to belong to the lodge, you had to take the initiatory and three degrees. Then you was, you could visit any lodge, anywhere. Years later, as membership went down they fixed it so you only had to take one degree. And our lodge, I think our lodge did the first degree back then, you know, that's one we specialized in. We could do all the degrees, but our best one was the first degree.



EB: All right. So what are Oddfellows – we got a little sidetracked there, but we were talking about what it was like when you had a full membership, and you would go to a meeting, hall full of people. So what is it like now when you have a lodge meeting or when you try to do something as a group?

LW: Now, when I have a lodge meeting, me and Paul and Ben, my secretary, will attend all of the meetings basically. If I need a special meeting or I'm going to have a supper or we're going to make a donation and invite whoever we've donated to, now instead of having a supper at the hall, we will go to a restaurant somewhere. And the Oddfellows will all show up if they're called, you know, special meeting, they will show up. Otherwise a meeting is just formality – opening, closing, if we've got business then we conduct the business, which is basically if we're going to make a donation. You know, certain times of year we donate to the food bank, and the hospice place in Lewiston, the Oddfellows Home, and of course the hospital and ambulance service. We can make our donations with fewer members.

EB: So what has it been like to watch the Oddfellows make – over the years, change from this huge group of people into something much different?

LW: Oh it's been – it's been terrible sad, that as the lodge gets smaller, mostly from the members dying off you know. When I joined there was a lot of old men then (laughs), now I'm the old man of the lodge. And there's no way to get new members in that we have nothing to offer except, come to meeting and who are we going to donate to. It's impossible now to get a membership where you could have socials. But we still do have once a year we invite the ladies and we invite the wives. We do that on the evening that we make the big donation. And of course Rick Batt has to put us on a turkey supper once a year. Which he does faithfully.

EB: Oh, I didn't know about that.

LW: Yes. I understand that as he hires – the lady that takes Maureen's [FCHN Director of Development] place, I forget her title, but the first question he asks her is if she knows how to put on a turkey supper for the Oddfellows. (laughs) So that's a good evening. We plan that, we have it at the hospital, and of course Rick pays for that. We make a social evening of that, we invite the ladies, and if we have any donations to make maybe we can make them on that evening, you know make a good evening of it.

EB: So could you talk a little bit more about the relationship the Oddfellows have built with the hospital?

LW: As time went by, we would get pet projects we would donate to. We would set and try to think who we would donate to that to help the most people in either community. And of course the hospital was a big part of that – as was the ambulance service. Also the nurses' training, and anything that had to do with kids – you know, kids going to school or scholarships, or...that's how it came about, and I don't remember right when we started donating to the hospital every year. You know, once we donate, we donate every



year, and then as the hospital expanded, we was able to contribute a big piece of money for that expansion, as well as the library, and one of the rehab rooms on the second floor, I don't know what they call them. And we stayed with that. And now as we've got to the point where, as old as we are, if we don't get rid of our money, if we don't donate it now, where us old guys have a chance to say where it's going and see it get there and enjoy the people that receive it, you know, we ain't going to get to do it, and so that's the reasons for the big donations now. The membership is getting smaller.

EB: Are there any other big donations that you have lined up?

LW: Yes, we're going to donate – we're going to donate 200,000 to the nurses' award program. And I'm not going to talk about that. When you talk with Paul, he will fill you in on that, because him and his wife was the ones that kind of instigated, started it. And it's named after – it's the Ellen Washburn Awards program, and Paul will talk with you better than I can about that.

EB: Could you tell me little bit more about the donation to the Medical Library? Why did the Oddfellows decide that you wanted to give such a substantial donation to the Medical Library?

LW: When Rick was going through the expansion, he needed X amount of bucks, and we had waited quite a while and, if we donated so much there was this – I forget the group but they would match whatever we donated. And if the donation was big enough, you got a plaque put in that part of the hospital, saying, you know, the Oddfellows or whoever had donated this, so the thing that attracted us was the library, and for 75,000 we got our name in the library. And at the time we was able to do that. And that's started our relationship with the library. And then of course we donated every year to the library, and as we're going smaller and getting out of the money bit, we decided to make this donation, you know, 200,000 but it's awarded so that Rick or whoever does the donation, they take a percentage every year, and this will last forever, you know. Emily will only get x amount of bucks every year, and the way it's set up, if it's a bad year and the interest rate is low, then Emily will get a little less, if it's high she'll get a little high – it's adjusted so it will always be 200,000 principal. That was our way of thinking as we donated to the library. If you give Rick 200,000, you know, he could spend it in a week. If you just give it to him, to the hospital, you know, that's no big deal, but for this to go on forever, that was the way that we thought to set it up for the library.

EB: And now the display that the library has set up – with pictures, with different memorabilia from the Oddfellows as a way of thanking the Oddfellows for their donations over the years – could you talk a little bit about putting that together and having that in the library?

LW: Betsy Kimball was in Maureen's place when we donated that, and she, as a gift to the Oddfellows she got that scrapbook. And also she instigated a photographer to take a picture of all of the Oddfellows that was alive at that time. Of course quite a few of them are gone by now, but it was a great photographer that made the picture that will be in the



library I guess as long as there is a library. And there's a lot of pride in that. As I've talked with Emily, she said she has people, women come in there with their kids and point out, you know, this is your grandpa, he was an Oddfellow, and so there's a lot of pride in something like that. It's good thinking, on my part, that the Oddfellows will always be a part of the library. And I think our donation was big enough to warrant something like that.

EB: That's wonderful. So what are some of the more memorable things you've been involved in over the years as an Oddfellow?

LW: Up until I started being Noble Grand, you know, head of the Oddfellows, it was just being an Oddfellow, then it's being Noble Grand. You get to conduct a meeting, you don't get to decide this or that or suggest or anything, you conduct the meeting. And for them to vote me in as Noble Grand for so many years – I have no idea how many, but it's a lot – I get all of my pride from knowing that I'm still the Noble Grand, I still have these brothers that I can call and they support me 100 percent, it's unbelievable.

EB: So you don't know how long that you've been Noble Grand?

LW: I wouldn't even dare to guess.

EB: How did that happen, do you remember when you became, when you took on that role?

LW: As the lodge went on you advanced one chair every year, you know, from the Outside Guardian, Inside Guardian, Supporters, and Wardens – all of the chairs, there must have been a dozen of them. Every year you'd advance until to get to be Noble Grand, and then Past Grand. Well that didn't work quite this way with me. For years I never was made Noble Grand, and I forget what year I got in. After that, there was just a few years I wasn't Noble Grand. Now I'm Noble Grand out of necessity. We have Paul as the financial secretary as he knows money. We have Ben as the secretary because he's a good secretary and writes and keeps the minutes well. I can't do either because I'm not good with money, and I can't write, so the only thing left is for me to be Noble Grand. It's really no big deal, it's just somebody's got to be, and...

EB: So what are your favorite memories over your time as an Oddfellow?

LW: Favorite memories...I guess the favorite memories would be the meetings, the suppers we've had with the hospital and with the other groups. Usually if we donate like to the hospice or any of those places – the food bank – these people will come up and thank us for the donation, as does Rick Batt. To me, I guess those are the memorable evenings.

EB: So, and you've already touched on this too, but what, again, what are you the most proud about from being an Oddfellow, what makes you the most proud?



LW: Me or the group?

EB: You, specifically. You, Larry.

LW: Being a Noble Grand and being able to – I was the one that instigated this final donations as we got older. I thought that if, myself, as the oldest one in the Wilton Lodge and Paul, who is 85 in Livermore, about the only Livermore brother we got left, if we don't do this now, then we're not going to get to. So over the last couple years I have been working on making these donations and doing it right. You know, only gonna get one chance. And so we went a great length to do this right. I think that would be what I'll be proud of.

EB: Is there anything else that you'd like to share about being an Oddfellow or anything else that you've done over the years that you'd like to talk about?

LW: No it's still, still goes back to the pride in being an Oddfellow and being the Noble Grand, you know, makes sure the lodge runs right, makes sure the lodge is run according to the book. As we moved from the big lodge hall in Wilton, I was instrumental in selling that, as the lodges got smaller. Then I was instrumental in uniting the two lodges because the membership was so few. Times like that is I guess what I'll remember.

EB: All right. Anything else?

LW: I guess that's it.

EB: All right, well thank you Larry. That was wonderful.

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Interviewee: Paul Washburn  
Interviewer: Emily Brostek  
Date: 8/21/06  
Place: Healthy Community Coalition, East Wilton

Paul Washburn: That's the valediction that a past Sovereign Grand Master made up. In fact, I was at – I think Miami, when it first came out.

Emily Brostek: Oh really?

PW: Yep.

EB: Can you tell me about that?

PW: Well this – he was one of the old time Oddfellows. Very popular with everybody. And I think, instead of being a past Sovereign Grand Master he was past Grand Squire, which was the terminology at that time, but later it was changed to past Grand Master. This now is used in all Oddfellow lodges.

EB: Can you tell me a little about what it says? What does it mean, to the Oddfellows?

PW: Well it tells what they believe in. And most of them do remember it, memorize it. And the last part here, where it says “to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan.” And that has been part of their philosophy over the years.

EB: But the valediction itself is pretty new then, you know, compared to the organization.

PW: Within, I would think it was about the late seventies or early eighties that that came out.

EB: Oh wow. I didn't know that.

PW: The order is much older than that. But this particular valediction was something that was instituted, I would guess maybe in the eighties.

EB: What event was it – you said it was in Florida, where a man formed the valediction?

PW: I think it was. Sovereign Grand Lodge meets all over the country, ordinarily each year, and delegates, past Grand Masters, past Grand Patriarchs, are like the legislature in your state, and they meet and vote on new issues at the Sovereign Grand Lodge. And the year – I went twice, I went to Miami Beach the first time, and the second time I went to Pittsburgh – and I think it was at Miami Beach that I heard it first.

EB: So it sounds like you know a lot about the history of the Oddfellows. Can you tell me a little bit about...



PW: Well the name “Oddfellows”, from what I have picked up and heard, started in England, and it was primarily working class people who wanted to associate and have a – and meet together. And part of their order at that time was to help their fellow man, as it states here, to visit the sick, bury the dead, and educate the orphan. And that was something new. I think that this was primarily in England, and that was something new, that a group of men would do those things, and the general public though that they were odd. And that was the designation of Oddfellows.

EB: So what about – how did the Oddfellows get started in this area, do you know about the history of the Oddfellows around Wilton and Livermore Falls?

PW: I don’t know. I had a book that – the hospital has it now –

EB: Yeah, I’ve looked at that

PW: - a little red book, and it tells about the different lodges. As to how it started, I don’t know. The start of Oddfellowship in this country was in Baltimore, Maryland. And they – there was one Oddfellows who joined in England who came to this country, and he wanted to become a member of an Oddfellows lodge in this country. And I think he advertised in the local paper, any Oddfellows that he’d like to meet with them, and five of them met in the –I think it was the Inn of the Seven Stars, in Baltimore – and formed the first lodge, and then he became, I think he was the Noble Grand of that lodge, and became the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland. That was the beginning of it in this country.

EB: So tell me a little bit more about the Oddfellows. What makes it different than other organizations?

PW: Well, it is a fraternity of men, and now, women are allowed to, are permitted to join the Oddfellows lodge. Originally it was all for men, and eventually the women wanted a fraternal organization, and one of the Oddfellows started what they called a Rebekah Lodge. And they meet. Of course they have to have suppers, that’s a necessity. And they visit with other lodges. I think in that book, red book, it tells about lodges travelling by train and visiting other lodges, and I know when I first joined, we had lodges in Rumford, Dixfield, Canton, Livermore Falls, and Wilton. That was their district at that time. And we used to visit, back and forth, and they have what they call district meetings where all lodges in the district meet at one lodge hall.

EB: So how did you become involved in the Oddfellows? When did you become a member?

PW: I joined in 1955 and a co-worker in the mill approached me. I found out afterwards that the lodge was having a contest – this was Livermore Falls Lodge at the time – and there was a contest between the Noble Grand and the Vice Grand who was next in line. I think the winning group was supposed to receive a free supper from the losing group. But at the time when I joined there were 17 of us that joined at the same time.



EB: Wow. So did you know a lot of other people who were members of the Oddfellows? Did you have family members or other friends?

PW: I didn't know it at the time, but I found out over the years my grandfather was a member, years ago. In fact, I have, there's a military – semi-military branch of the order, the Cantons. At one time, they used, what they used to call the old tri-corner cap, you've probably seen them, comes up to a peak -

EB: Oh yeah.

PW: - at the top, and flares out on the sides. And I remember growing up my grandfather had a sword, and he had a hat in a box, but I had no idea what it was. And after my folks died, I was cleaning out the house and I found this box, with the original hat, I still have it.

EB: Oh wow.

PW: So my grandfather was a member. And some of the co-workers in the mill were members at the time I joined.

EB: So tell me about the other Oddfellows that you've known over the years, what are they like?

PW: Some of them are everyday workers, and when I joined we had many professional people. We had doctors, lawyers, funeral directors who members of the lodge. I think – I don't think that's the tendency so much today but it was at that time.

EB: Is there anything about Oddfellows that makes them different than other people? Is there any characteristic that a lot of Oddfellows share, anything like that?

PW: No, I wouldn't say so. They're primarily working class people who like the fraternity and the chance to get together. Usually they have – not so much today, but they used to have a lot of suppers and they, originally they would meet every week. Now most of them meet probably twice a month. Of course the membership has decreased over the years.

EB: What makes the Oddfellows different than other fraternal orders? Like what makes them different from the Masons?

PW: Well, I think...I think the Oddfellows feel more at ease at their meetings than they do in some of the other orders. More at ease, more relaxed. But they – they do a lot of good. Originally, before we had all the benefits that we do now – social security, unemployment insurance, workmen's comp, and so forth – the Oddfellows, many lodges had what they called sick benefits. And a member was sick or got hurt, then the lodge



would pay a weekly benefit until they were able to return to work. So that was one of the benefits of the order.

EB: What other activities are Oddfellows involved in?

PW: Well, in this date – you have the local lodges and then you have the grand bodies, Grand Lodge for men, the Rebekah Assembly for the women. And one of the things that was started in 1957 I believe. When my wife was president of the Rebekah Assembly, there was an acute shortage of nurses in the state of Maine. And the heads of three branches – the Grand Lodge, the Grand Encampment, and the Rebekah Assembly – got together and worked on a program to provide scholarships for nursing students. And as I say, that was started in 1957 and it still continues today.

EB: And that's still something that you're pretty involved in?

PW: Very much so, because my wife was involved in that until she died. And I've been treasurer of that committee for several years now. And we provide scholarship for – an average of 15 to 20 every year.

EB: So what do you think that the Oddfellows in this area have contributed to the community?

PW: One thing that I remember, and this was before I joined the order. I went to the high school auditorium in Livermore Falls, and the Oddfellows put on a black-face minstrel show, and they had a large group, and as I picture it now there was a large audience. And that was, at the time, before the salt vaccine came out, and practically eradicated the disease, but I think they donated a machine to the local hospital.

EB: Oh, ok.

PW: So that was one good thing that they did, and our lodges in recent years have been donating to some of the organizations – we donate to the hospital, every year have for several years now. We donate to the Good Shepherd Food Bank, and in the last two or three years to the hospice house in Lewiston.

EB: How do you pick which organizations or which causes you're going to give money to?

PW: Well, we vote on it. What we think is worthwhile. We very much concentrated it now on those three organizations that I've mentioned.

EB: Is there a reason for that?

PW: Well, we felt we were doing some good.



EB: Makes sense. Do you think that this community is different than it would have been if the Oddfellows hadn't been in this area for so long?

PW: Well it probably has made some difference over the years. When I first joined, there was quite active membership in all of the lodges. Well, it was primarily working class people. Before television it was much of their relaxation and entertainment.

EB: So how has the Oddfellows changed from the time that you joined?

PW: Well, it has changed of course in membership. A good friend of mine who was a past Grand Master had done some research, and according to him, the membership peaked in the 1920s, and started to decrease from that time on. And in – we had the district, which I just named, and there was another district of Farmington, New Portland, Phillips, Mount Vernon. And many of them were quite active lodges. But in the last 25 or 30 years, most of those lodges have gone out.

EB: Why do you think that is? What's made this change happen for the Oddfellows?

PW: Well, we always blame it on television. I think if, a person comes home from work, a little bit tired. Rather than go out, especially if it's a stormy night, turn on the television and watch a program. I think that is one factor that has made a big difference.

EB: Do you think there's anything else that's made a difference?

PW: Well, another thing, maybe it's connected with the schools too. The young people have so many activities that they aren't interested in joining something like this.

EB: Because they have so many other things going on?

PW: Right.

EB: Back when you joined, did a lot of people join when they were very young? When they were in their teens?

PW: Around 18, they would join. And at that time it was quite common to have generations of the same family – the grandfather, the father, and the son. But now, in many families, the sons growing up are not interested.

EB: So tell me about the decision to join the two lodges – the Wilton Lodge and the Livermore Falls Lodge.

PW: Well it was a situation where, at least one of them would have just surrendered their charter and not been a part of a lodge. And we felt that, at the time, by joining the two, we would have more membership and would be able to survive longer. Of course the problem now is that our membership – and this is quite true in most lodges – the membership is growing older. Eventually, with not any young people coming in,



eventually they can't continue. But I mean, that's just our particular lodge, I'm not talking about statewide.

EB: Because there's some lodges in this state that are still pretty active, is that right?

PW: Yes, there are some that are quite active.

EB: What do you think the difference is? How come in some areas of Maine, people, you know, still join, and, you know, in this area, it hasn't really played out that way?

PW: Well I think some of it is the individuals. Some individuals join and are very active, and are good leaders and they bring in other members to work with them. Where probably many of us are just guilty of just going day to day, we don't have that activity.

EB: What has it been like to watch the Oddfellows change so much over the years, from when you joined and there were so many people, to this day?

PW: Well, it's a different situation now. You had degree work, which is always interesting, and you visited other lodges. Now, well I think the nearest lodge we would have would be in Auburn. So you don't visit, and you don't have the activity.

EB: Can you tell me a little bit more about the kind of activities that you were able to do, back when there was a really active lodge, about the degrees and about the different lodges that you visited?

PW: We had – we had degree work quite frequently, and we had some good, good members working the degrees. I remember one member who was a lawyer – it was a little bit amusing too – he knew the part, but he wouldn't give it unless he had a ritual in his hand. He never looked at the ritual, but that was his prop, and it was a long part and he had it thoroughly memorized, and that ritual was the prop.

EB: Larry [Lawrence Wilbur] had told me that at one point, this lodge, you went down and visited a lodge in Virginia. Is that something that you went along?

PW: That was before I joined.

EB: Oh, that was before you joined?

PW: But I've heard quite a bit about it. I think what started it, one of our members had a son in the Navy, in, I think it was Norfolk Virginia. And I don't know if they wanted to work the degree on him or somebody that he knew in his company, but that was the connection. And I think the Livermore Falls Lodge had a reputation for working a good third degree. And I think they rented a bus, and they had a few cars, and the Wilton Lodge went along, and I think they took some parts in the degree, but the two lodges went down there. I guess they had quite a time. I know they had – one of the members from Wilton took a movie camera, and he had a movie reel on it. I did see that, he came



to our lodge one time, and presented it. I've asked people in Wilton, but apparently that movie reel has been lost.

EB: Oh that's too bad.

PW: Yes, it is.

EB: Be neat to see.

PW: That was quite an experience. I did go to Portsmouth one time, our lodge went down there and worked the degree, that was in the winter time.

EB: So the Livermore Falls lodge, what degree did they specialize in?

PW: Third degree.

EB: Third degree.

PW: Yep.

EB: And so you would travel to different lodges because of that specialization?

PW: In fact I remember going to Mount Vernon one time, we worked the third degree there. Philips lodge used to specialize in the second degree. And I think – I remember Wilton lodge was quite active in the first degree. One lodge might specialize – now, there's a lodge in Portland, that at one time used to a hundred men on the floor, when they worked a degree. They can't get a hundred men now (laughs), but...the last that they did that, they used to ask for volunteers from other lodges, but it was, it was a great degree.

EB: Did you ever see that when they did it with a hundred people?

PW: Yes, I've seen it.

EB: Must have been quite a sight.

PW: It was quite a site.

EB: So what other things have you been involved in, over the years? It sounds like you've traveled a lot.

PW: Well, there's an organization made up of the New England States, and the provinces of Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces, which we call the Northeast Oddfellows Association. And the members of those – from those jurisdictions meet. We used to meet once or twice a year on a rotating basis. We might be in Maine this year and next year in Vermont, the following year it might be in the Atlantic Provinces. So we did quite a bit of



traveling. But there was one member in the Atlantic Provinces who was very faithful, but he complained. He said, to go from Nova Scotia to Vermont was a long trip, and that organization built a youth camp in Maine, down in the town of Montville. This man was instrumental in getting the meeting changed to Montville so that instead of him starting over there and coming way over here, now all of them come to Maine, and meet at the youth camp. In fact that's coming up next month.

EB: So they still meet in Montville.

PW: Right. In Montville. And they also sponsor what they call a conclave. And that meets on a – that still is on a rotating basis, that it will meet. I think, yes, it met in Maine this year, and I think it probably goes to Rhode Island. And there's I think six jurisdictions, and that is to raise money for this camp, youth camp. They have a banquet, ordinarily they have a banquet on Friday night, and then they have some activity on Saturday, they may rent buses and take people to local attractions, and then Saturday night they have what they call drills, marching drills in a gymnasium. And that, the members pay usually a set fee for a package deal for that weekend. And whatever profit there is goes into the Northeast Oddfellows Association to further the camp down there.

EB: What kind of camp is it? It's a camp for children?

PW: Youth camp. Each jurisdiction has a cabin there, and then there's a large building for the dining hall, kitchen and dining hall in one building. There's a nurse's station. There's a recreation building. And then there's a – whoever is operating it that year, she has a cabin of her own, and then she has an assistant and he has a cabin. Originally it was the Montville Fair Grounds, and the Association bought that, That was I think before I joined, and cleared it. And they have sports. It's right next to the pond, and they have swimming and boating. There are many activities.

EB: So do you still go to these meetings, the ones with the Northeast Association?

PW: I go. I usually go for one day. It starts on Saturday and then ends on Sunday. In late years, I might go one day. I have been many times.

EB: Sounds like it. So what are your favorite memories from things you've been involved in as an Oddfellow, or favorite stories that you have?

PW: Well, I think some of the long trips we've taken, some of the short trips. Meeting with other lodges. When I joined our lodge had a band, and I remember one time we went to Newport and our band played there. Once in a while they would have, on a Saturday, they would schedule three degrees with three different teams, degree teams. So that was an activity that they had. And they, visiting in our own jurisdictions, district. One person would be a district deputy for a year or two years, and it was his responsibility to visit every lodge in the district. And they had what they called a district meeting, which would be at one of the lodges.



EB: So it sounds like you got to meet a lot of different people.

PW: Oh yes. And visiting other jurisdictions. And then, in October is the time for the Grand Lodge and Rebekah Assembly to meet. And that usually rotates between Portland, Lewiston, and Bangor areas, and members from all over the state come to those meetings.

EB: Do members from this lodge still go to that meeting? Do you go?

PW: I'm usually the one. (laughs)

EB: You're usually the only one?

PW: Yes.

EB: So what happens at that meeting?

PW: They may come in with legislation which will effect all of the lodges. They may vote to raise the dues. They may vote on some project at that time. And they all make a – each lodge makes a report, and then after that meeting, the secretary compiles all the information. A report of the session is available for the membership.

EB: Do you have any other favorite memories that you'd like to talk about, anything else you've been involved in that you want to share?

PW: No, I guess I can't think of anything off hand.

EB: What are you the most proud of from your time as an Oddfellow?

PW: Well, being a part of a worldwide organization that has high ideals, and, as I mentioned before, many members feel more relaxed in the Oddfellows organization than they do in other fraternities.

EB: Why do you think that is? Is it just the way the Oddfellows is run?

PW: Well, it – there's no real dress code. I mean, some organizations that they go to, you got to have a uniform or you're expected to have a suit and tie and so forth. In the Oddfellows, most of us try to be dressed neatly, but there's no real dress code.

EB: So things are just kind of less formal?

PW: Right, less formal and more relaxed.

EB: What does being an Oddfellow mean to you?



PW: Well, it means being part of a worldwide fraternity. I've been to, I mentioned I've been to the Sovereign Grand Lodge twice. I've seen members from Switzerland, England, Australia, that came to our Sovereign Grand Lodge meetings.

EB: Is there anything else you want to share before we wrap this up?

PW: (laughs) No, I think I've talked enough.

EB: All right, great. Well thank you.

*[recording ends]*

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Interviewee: Benjamin Welch  
Interviewer: Emily Brostek  
Date: 8/21/06  
Place: Healthy Community Coalition, East Wilton

EB: Ok. This is Emily Brostek, and we're at the Healthy Community Coalition. I'm with Ben Welch, and we're going to talk about the Oddfellows. So first, this is something that Larry (Lawrence Wilbur) gave me (*hands Ben card with Oddfellows valediction*).

Ben Welch: What's that?

EB: That's something that Larry gave me. Could you just tell me a little bit about that?

BW: Well, that's something we have to learn before we can join. A lot of guys have kind of – not gone to as many meetings as they should have, and they've forgotten it over the years, but the core group of us can recite it without reading it off the paper. But it's – basically, it reinforces, not only to the group but to ourselves that our purpose is to help people. And, of course it started out when nobody had insurance, there was no social security, and the group kind of helped each other, helped their families, helped the children. After the Civil War there were a lot of widows, a lot of orphans, course there was nobody to take care of them except the groups. So, that's where a lot of it came from. That was about the time that the Oddfellows started getting big. And, I don't know what else I can say about it.

EB: Well, tell me more about the Oddfellows. What do you think – what makes the organization the Oddfellows what it is, what makes it different from other organizations?

BW: We enjoy helping people. We enjoy giving things away. Money is about the only way we have to help people right now, and we've given away scholarships. We've tried a lot of things. I am really surprised at how many don't really care about getting help, especially when it comes to scholarships. We allow the schools, say ok, here's three hundred dollar scholarship; we'd like to have three students. And the students will not take the time to thank us for them, they'll not take the time to come to a supper to pick them up. And consequently we've kind of backed off on giving the school college scholarships, because the quality of the students is such that they don't care. I don't really know what it is, but I hope it picks up. I hope that the future – in the future, especially our special – well, I guess, biggest problem is, a lot of the students that were getting the smaller scholarships weren't the most enthusiastic.

EB: Oh, I see.

BW: And they didn't care quite so much. And the ones that get big scholarships, those were the ones that worked hard, those were the ones that get good ranks in schools, and those were the ones that are going to amount to something in life. But they were getting bigger scholarships than they could afford to give, and they were - your best students always have full four-year scholarships. So.



EB: Is that something that – has it always been that way with scholarships, or is that something that's changed over time?

BW: Well, we haven't given scholarships a whole lot. We just started probably fifteen years ago.

EB: Oh, ok.

BW: And we quit – about five years ago. And so, yeah, I'd say it's - it hasn't been this way until a person didn't have to work to get into college. Nowadays you can find a college to take almost anyone, so.

EB: So tell me about some of the other things that the Oddfellows are involved in, besides scholarships.

BW: Well, we have – we've donated to the libraries, we've donated to a lot of small local groups. (pauses) Oh, what are some of them? I don't know, local library, the reading clubs up to Keneowatha Park, Wilton Library had a – I can't even remember the name of the group – summer reading programs. Nurses are big ones, because we've always given to nurses. Not only in the – oh, we don't give to individuals so much anymore because of the Nurses Scholarship fund, we just give to the fund nowadays. We give to arthritis groups, eye bank was one of our big ones, arthritis prevention was one of our big ones.

EB: How do you pick as a group which organizations you're going to give money to?

BW: Well, I guess it started out that the home lodge, the big lodge – the National Lodge and the State Lodge had their favorites, then would have people petition us, local groups petition us. We looked at the need of the individual more than the need of groups. Like I used to be quite active with United Way. And it isn't something that the Oddfellows want to look for, want to donate to, because they want more individual to control where the moneys go. So, occasionally somebody will write, a child will have a problem, or a family will have a problem, and they'll ask if there's anything we can do to help, and we'll donate a little bit of money. That doesn't happen so much anymore. As a matter of fact, a lot people have kind of forgotten about us, and they don't ask for funds anymore, so we just – we just pick out our old favorites, nowadays. And of course the hospital has been one of our old favorites. Started out with ambulance – the EMT down – well, whatever the EMT was down in Livermore Falls. That's where it started. And then it's gone into the hospital, and now it's almost all hospital. But we have our group home, we have nurses training. There's – a lot of the guys were getting old, and we was approached by a hospice group. Help us, but some of us someday may need that. So we started donating to that. And the food bank. So it's...people that ask I guess, and nowadays they don't ask so much, so we just pick out what – the big groups that ask.

EB: So how did you become involved in the Oddfellows?



BW: Oh, I had a – had a friend that was an Oddfellow, and he just was drumming up, trying to get members. I guess membership was falling off, and he asked me if I wanted to join. At the time, I didn't have anything special I was doing with my life, and I liked – always liked helping people. I'm kind of a crude guy, and not the best looking person in the world, but I still like helping people. And I got exposed to it and I liked the group, I liked what they were doing, and I just stayed with them.

EB: Great. So can you tell me about the other Oddfellows that you've met over the years? What are they like, as a group?

BW: As a group...I never thought of it before. They are competitive. They like playing cards. Although we don't do that much anymore, the group has gotten so low. We used to have two or three tables of bridge, we don't play bridge at all anymore. Some guys would play cribbage. We'd have suppers, and play jokes on one another. There was all – everybody was friendly. Everybody was friendly, it was a good group of guys. Once in a while, we'd get our wives involved, but usually it was just the guys getting together, and you could cuss a little bit more that way. But, everybody wanted to help. Everybody wanted to see that other people – everyone had a kind heart, let's put it that way. That's why I liked the group, that's why they're such a bunch of nice guys, because they like to help people.

EB: Great. So what do you think the Oddfellows in this area, what have they contributed to this community?

BW: To the community...they've helped the town of Wilton develop a lot better. We still donate a little bit, to the Blueberry Festival. We haven't helped the members so much anymore because they don't need it. They've got social security. We've had a base for – it seemed at one time that all the important people in the town belonged. All the police chiefs and town managers or selectmen, bank presidents, business owners. They was all part of the Oddfellows, as much as the Lion's Club or any of the other big organizations. And being part of the Oddfellows, they knew the needs of the community, and was able to use Oddfellow funds, Oddfellow directives, Oddfellow policy, to make the town a better place for people to live. Then we, like we said we got into the schools a little bit, but that didn't last long. We got into the eventually the hospital ambulance, healthcare, eye bank and arthritis, people that would get sick as they get older. We moved more to that and less out of the community because people didn't seem to need us anymore.

EB: Why do you think that is?

BW: Because of government control. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

EB: (laughs) So how have the Oddfellows changed from when you joined.

BW: They've just – it's like air going out of a tire. I was the last member, I was the last person to join our Oddfellow group. That was back in '82. There were a couple other individuals who joined the same time I did. But they didn't stay, they didn't pay their



dues, they had other things, they didn't – they didn't care. Unless you care, the Oddfellows isn't a good group to belong to. And it's – the older fellows have died off, and no new fellows have come in. So that's, it's – also we have more money to give away. And it's made it more fun. I wish we was able to raise more funds, so we could donate more funds. But people have other priorities now. They would rather watch television than go hike in the woods. They'd rather pay taxes, and let the government take care of people than to raise money themselves and take care of people.

EB: So you think that a lot of what has changed with how many people are in the Oddfellows or what the Oddfellows are able to do has to do with the role of the government now?

BW: Yes. Oh, without a doubt, yes. Like I said, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal just took our purpose away.

EB: That's interesting. So tell me about the decision to join the two lodges together, the Wilton Lodge with the Livermore Falls Lodge. Were you involved with that?

BW: Yes. That happened because...mainly because Livermore Falls couldn't get a quorum. They had so few people that the only way they could survive was to join with us, and they had a lot of funds. They had a lot more funds than Wilton did. That's one reason Paul always gets his way (laughs). But, he's worked with it, he's always been a good Oddfellow, we can't, we can't begrudge him anything. The hospital was always part of the Livermore Falls thing, because, like I said, it started out with the ambulance down there, and evolved into donations to the hospital. They had most of the funds. Probably everything that Wilton had at the time we joined is all that's left. But it's still, it's still co-mingled, there's no Wilton, no Livermore Falls, it's all one group. And, we have, actually there's only two members of Livermore Falls that ever attend meetings anymore. But there's only probably half a dozen of the Wilton ones. We had more members, they had more funds, they had resources, we had more members. So we decided, whoever - we'd keep the name of one group, and meet in the area of another group. And I'm surprised we didn't keep Livermore Falls name and meet up in Wilton, because everybody, most of us was from Wilton. But instead we meet up in Livermore Falls, and took the Wilton, Wilton name. Combined all our funds, and we've been giving away five or ten thousand dollars a year for the past, since we joined together, I think that was close to ten years ago, maybe a little less than that. But give five or ten thousand dollars a year away. Some of the older guys were getting concerned that I still hadn't grown up and something might happen to me, so they'd be left with not enough people to decide where this money went. So they decided they wanted to divvy it up now, or most of it and a lot of the wishes were Paul's, but like I said, he was the one that was in charge of most of the money before we joined. It was Livermore Falls. And I had no problem, I don't think anyone in the group had any problem, with his decisions, I thought they were wonderful decisions. And we still got plenty to work on, plenty to give away. We can give away three or four thousand dollars a year away still, with no problems.



EB: So what kinds of things have you been involved in over the years as an Oddfellow? Any thing other than...

BW: Well, I haven't been involved in membership. We've tried a few times, but nobody seems – I think, I suspect the name may have something to do with not being able to get new members. Fifty years ago nobody ever heard of a gay person. Now a lot of people say, Oddfellows, does that mean you're gay? So I think the name may have something to do with why we can't get people, but then every group is having trouble. The Granges, the Masons, business groups. The Lions don't seem to be doing too bad, but they, that's their way of letting everyone know that they're dealing together, back room dealings I guess.

EB: So why do you think that is? What is the change, in why all these groups aren't getting members anymore?

BW: Television has a lot to do with it. Home entertainment, you can stay home and be entertained. It used to be, even 50 years ago, I think, more than 50 percent of my mother's family, and 50 percent of my father's family had animals. They raised their own meat, they raised their own milk, their own eggs, they had their own gardens. A grocery store wasn't something really important, so people stayed home and worked. I imagine 100 years ago 90 percent of people stayed home and worked and provided for themselves. Nowadays people go to the store and do it. They have a lot more free time, and they use that time for entertainment, they get out so much that they don't need – they don't need [to] intermingle with other people and meet other people because they do it on an everyday basis. Back 50, 100 years ago they was home all the time providing for themselves, and going to a meeting, like going to church, and to Oddfellows, going to Masons or the Grange, was a way to get out and socialize. Which they didn't have in their everyday life. Nowadays, it's, everyday you're out socializing with someone. Even if it's just going down to the corner store to buy a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk. Years ago you was always home, you didn't have that opportunity. So when a meeting of any type come up, it was an opportunity to get out and socialize.

EB: Makes sense. So what are your favorite memories over the years, from things that you've been involved with as an Oddfellow, favorite stories that you have?

BW: That...I haven't been around as – we haven't done a whole lot. Some of my favorites is passing checks, when we have our annual suppers and we pass checks out. We did have one scholarship recipient, school scholarship recipient, who was very pleased in it, sent thank you notes --getting thank you notes is nice. Being acknowledged as a benefactor is nice. I guess those are some of my favorites. There's none in particular I can pick out. I always enjoy that.

EB: So that kind of leads into the next question. What are you the most proud of from your time as an Oddfellow?



BW: What am I most proud of...I guess about the only thing I can think of is the valediction, the fact that we help people. I'm more proud of that than anything else I can think of. Just the fact of helping people, seeing the enjoyment, knowing, even if I don't see the enjoyment, knowing that people are being helped. Any one particular circumstance...I can't really think of any.

EB: Ok. So why do you think that you, when you were initiated, you said you were initiated with a couple other people. How come it stuck with you, how come you stuck with the Oddfellows where a lot of other people over the years maybe haven't?

BW: Well, I know a couple of them were looking at what they could get out of the Oddfellows rather than what they could do to help. Some of them moved out of the area, lost touch. The ones that are still here, they didn't care about helping people, they're the personality type that want to get more than give. I think that's why they dropped out.

EB: And that was the difference. And one last question that I have: what does being an Oddfellow mean to you? Which I guess we've already kind of talked about already.

BW: It means I have the opportunity to help people, to help organizations now more than people. But I - like the library. I'm not sure how the library's going to help, but people have let me know that it's going to help. And the facilities are there if I want to use them. So I suspect there'll be a lot of other people that will use them. Some people don't like to go, if they've got to wait in the hospital if they're there for someone who's sick and they can't go up to visit them and they got to find something else to do, they don't want to go into, they're not really so shook up they've got to go into the hospitality room or whatever it is, the chapel, then the library's an excellent place for them to go hang out. I think that helps, and I'm really proud of that. Now what was the question again?

EB: What does being an Oddfellow mean to you?

BW: Being an Oddfellow means being able to do those things. Being able to help people, even if it's not - it does filter down to the individual. Being able to help people that are in need. There's so many people who do need help, even though they don't know it. The time will come when - I never need any help, but the time will come when I may need some. If I help somebody else, maybe when I need it, it will be there. So I guess that's what it means to me. Being able to help people so that, perhaps when my time comes, it will be there for me. I'm kind of self-centered too, ain't I?

EB: Great. Well, that's all that I had for questions, was there anything else that you wanted like to say?

BW: I miss the suppers, I miss cooking our own suppers. I miss playing cards. I miss the socialization. I don't care for television. Maybe that's part of it, maybe that's why I've kind of stuck with the Oddfellows, because I don't like watching television. I'd rather stay home and cut wood. I am a home person, I enjoy working, I enjoy working around the house, cutting wood, working in the gardens. Occasionally I like to get out to meet



the guys, play some cards and have a supper, so. That's probably how it was a hundred years ago, and I'm just an old fashioned kind of person.

EB: All right, great. Anything else?

BW: Nope.

EB: All right, thank you so much.

BW: You're welcome.

*[recording ends]*

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Interviewee: Gene Judkins  
Interviewer: Emily Brostek  
Date: 8/30/06  
Place: Healthy Community Coalition, East Wilton

Emily Brostek: So this is Wednesday, August 30, 2006, and I'm in Wilton Maine at the Healthy Community Coalition. And we're going to be talking about Gene Judkins's experiences as an Oddfellow today. All right. So, first could you just tell me about the Oddfellows?

Gene Judkins: Well I can tell you it's a fraternal organization. Independent Order of Oddfellows. I believe it's British origin. I don't know what year it was started, I could find out, I don't know what year. It's for the betterment of the people belonging to it and also the community. Like I say, it's an international order. That would just about cover it I guess.

EB: So I see that you brought something. Can you tell me about that piece of paper you have?

GJ: Oh that's just – that would be, that's how we close our meetings, that's the valediction.

EB: Can you tell me about the valediction that the Oddfellows has?

GJ: Actually, this started, this is a secret fraternity. But in this age of technology you can find out anything, anytime you want about anything. It's a social gathering to discuss a order of business, one thing, we have a list of things to go through. Of course we believe in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and friendship, love and truth is the basic guide of the ultimate destiny of all mankind. I don't know what more you want to know other than that.

EB: No, that's fine. What do you think makes the Oddfellows different from other fraternal organizations? Like, what's different about the Oddfellows from the Masons or another group?

GJ: Of course I don't know anything about the Masons. They're both a secret fraternity, a fraternal group. And I don't know a thing about the Masons.

EB: Is there anything that sets the Oddfellows apart from other groups that you know? Maybe not the Masons specifically, but just...

GJ: No, not really. They, of course both the Masons and the Oddfellows are declining in membership. It's hard to get people to apply for membership. The Elks, that's a strong organization that's usually a younger group. And it's pretty hard to compete with them.



And it's hard to get people out of their homes today, with television, all the things going on.

EB: Right. How did you become involved in the Oddfellows? When did you become a member?

GJ: I was invited to join. I had friends. When I was in high school, the Oddfellows used to send people around, to speak, at the group and invite them to a supper and invite them to join the Masons – uh, Oddfellows. I didn't join then. But I was invited to join later in life, and I thought it was a privilege and an honor to be invited and I joined. Never been sorry that I have.

EB: So what changed your mind between when you were in high school and when they approached you about joining?

GJ: Oh, I don't know. I don't know how many people, kids in high school joined. I do know one, he belongs to the group now in Wilton. But I don't know how many they got.

EB: Do you know why, you said you had friends who were also Oddfellows when they joined. Do you know why they joined, was it another situation where they were invited by their friends, that kind of thing?

GJ: Yes. In the Oddfellows, you have to be invited. I believe in the Masons, you have to ask to join. I know my father and brother were Masons, but apparently they were quite faithful to the Masons, because they never suggested that I had to ask to join. (*laughs*) Maybe there was a reason back then. I didn't realize until I got along in years that you had to ask to join the Masons.

EB: Huh, interesting. Tell me about the other Oddfellows that you've met. What are they like, as a group of people?

GJ: All the Oddfellows I've known are very sincere, very faithful. They'll stand by you, thick or thin. Just – just people you want to be around.

EB: So what are the meetings, or the dinners, the suppers you've been to over the years, what are they like?

GJ: Social gathering, just meals. Of course we don't discuss business in meals or suppers or anything like that, we just enjoy each other. Just have a good time. At our regular meetings, we have to go through an order of business.

EB: So those are not social, the meetings.

GJ: Oh yeah, no, you...used to be the members would get there real early before the meeting, and play cribbage, just socialize, then have the meeting, and there's certain things in the meeting you'd have to go through, I have the list here. (*takes out list; reads*)



Call of officers; introduction to visiting brothers; reading records of the last meeting; brothers reported sick or distressed; bills written or referred; communications read and disposed of; pending application of memberships – now we don't get applications today. Report of the investigating committee, they investigate the applicant; balloting on the application for membership; application and balloting for the degrees; report of the committee on finance; initiation of degrees; reports of committees, like travel, social functions, suppers and so forth; unfinished business; new business; [inaudible], and then we close. I don't consider that secret, so that's why I read that. It could be found anywhere.

EB: So how long would a meeting take, back when you joined?

GJ: It would depend on how much business, depending on visiting members, things like that. It could be just a few minutes, or it could run into hours, just depending on what we had to discuss.

EB: Have you been to a meeting lately?

GJ: No, I haven't been recently. Last meeting I went to was when we voted on how to dispose of some of our money.

EB: So do you know anything about the history of the Oddfellows in this area at all?

GJ: I don't know a lot about it, no, I don't. I just – that's my failure, I guess, I just never bothered to study it.

EB: What are – are there any major events, or anything that you've participated in during the time that you've been an Oddfellow, or anything major that's happened to the organization around here?

GJ: That's happened to the organization or to me personally?

EB: Um, to the Oddfellows.

GJ: Well, a lot of Oddfellow, a lot of lodges have given up their charter, because of lack of membership. Wilton and Livermore joined, and, I don't...Farmington, I believe they've closed. I don't think they joined with anybody. In fact, I don't know, outside our lodge, I don't know whether other lodges are. I'm sure there are some. I just don't know about it.

EB: Which one were you a member of before they joined?

GJ: Wilton.

EB: Wilton.



GJ: Yes.

EB: So I guess we can jump to the next question. Were you involved in the decision to join the lodges together, the Livermore Falls lodge and the Wilton lodge?

GJ: Yep, everybody had to vote on it, yes.

EB: What was it like, that decision, what led up to it?

GJ: Well, we, see Wilton had some income property over the years. They owned a block in Wilton. The meeting hall, lodge hall, was up on the top floor, and the Oddfellows owned the whole block, so we had income producing property. A store down below, and a private residence, rental. And across the road, on the corner, was the old post office for Wilton, and the Oddfellows owned that – an income producing property. And membership dwindled and dwindled and dwindled, and it was decided that we should sell – sell the buildings. Over the years, we did, and we rented a small room in the American Legion Hall in Wilton. And then, I don't know why it came about, we voted to join with – oh that's when we, I guess that's when we we voted to join Livermore, because their membership was dwindling. And we joined them, and for a while we met down in Livermore, in the Masonic hall, [inaudible] Masonic hall in Livermore with them. Now we meet in a room out at the hospital. Franklin Memorial.

EB: How has the Oddfellows changed from the time that you joined?

GJ: Oh, it's changed drastically from the time I joined. There was quite a membership, I don't know the count. But I've heard, I know when I joined we was in the old lodge hall upstairs in the block we owned. And that room, I'm going to guess it was, dimensions were probably 80 by 30 or 40. And there were chairs completely around that. When I joined, and I've been, I've belonged about 35 years. And I don't remember seeing all the chairs filled, but I remember the older people that belonged when I joined, they'd talk about the '20s and the '30s, there'd be standing room only.

EB: Wow.

GJ: There was that many members. But back then, see, there was no television. Not everybody had a car back in the '20s and '30s. There was no home entertainment, so that was their weekly entertainment. Get out, and help other people.

EB: So is that why you think that membership has dropped off recently, because people have different ways to entertain themselves? Television?

GJ: What's that? Pardon me?

EB: Why has membership dropped off recently, or over the years?



GJ: Oh, there's too many home entertainments now, the TV and, oh, all kinds of activities. It's a faster paced world today. So many sporting events and things to go to. And another thing, of course it'd hard to compete with the Elks. They have a lot. They put on a lot of shows, they have a lot of activity, they have a bar, alcohol bar. And younger people, they just, it's more active.

EB: And so the Oddfellows just doesn't draw in the people who might have joined it as much. What do you think the Oddfellows have contributed to this community, over the years?

GJ: Well, we've contributed quite a lot, really – in scholarships. Recently we haven't given many scholarships, we haven't been - had any response from the students. I don't think it's because of the amount. I think we used to give \$300 to, I think it was four students, two from this area, two from Jay/Livermore. I think it was four; maybe I'm wrong. But \$300 is better than a stick in the eye, that'll pay for books. But we haven't had any response recently. We have contributed to quite a few charities. The Oddfellows have a beautiful Oddfellow home out in Auburn. We support that every year. We support the food pantry, and the nurses' program, as well as the hospital library. People have benefited from the things we've done, no question.

EB: How do you choose – how do you all choose which organizations you're going to give money to or which causes you're going to donate to?

GJ: Well, everybody has an input. We have all these, all these people that would like to have money, and we have to decide where the money should be spent for the best - for the most benefit.

EB: So for -

GJ: That's how we come up with it.

EB: - the most benefit to the community?

GJ: Yes. Yes.

EB: Is that why, you've kind of adopted the hospital to give a lot of money to over the years? Does it have to do with that?

GJ: Yeah, you can never go – never can go wrong by putting money there, really. You can't go wrong with the nurses' program, it's a statewide program.

EB: Right.

GJ: And the food pantry. These are all terrific things. And the Oddfellow home. There's other things that we have donated to on smaller scale. Like the Rebekahs, we've



supported the Rebekahs. I can't think of other things, but there's always something, this is what we have to go through. [recording inaudible]

EB: [recording resumes] Your personal experience, yep.

GJ: I've gone through an initiation degree, I don't know if they call it a degree, an initiatory. Then you've got first, second, third degree, that's going through the chairs, and I've gone through all the chairs. And I was Noble Grand, one year, which is...that's as far as I can go.

EB: What was that like, being the Noble Grand?

GJ: Oh, I liked it. Lawrence Wilbur's done it for years and years and years. Many years ago, you know, usually it was just one year, but there was so many people that everybody – not everybody, but, not everybody had a chance to be Noble Grand. It was a great honor. To be Noble Grand. It really was.

EB: And then you got to lead meetings and things like that as a Noble Grand.

GJ: Yep. Yeah, you conduct a meeting, every meeting, right.

EB: What are your favorite memories?

GJ: My favorite memories...well I'm very proud to be an Oddfellow. I don't wear it on my sleeve, but I certainly don't hide it. It's just a great feeling to know that you belong to a group that can help people that are not as fortunate as we are. Just a wonderful feeling, that's one of my memories. And memories of the social gathering, like every once in a while we'd invite our wives to go to a supper, or something like that. Just gather and have fun. And all the nice people I met, the memories will always be with me. Some great, great people.

EB: Did you meet people – I know that some of the Oddfellows have talked about how they got a chance to travel to a lot of different lodges and meet people –

GJ: Oh Lord, years ago they went all over the state. Of course we had all these regalia uniforms, clothing and everything, but we gave them away to somebody, I don't know. Oh, we had closets full of robes and things. I didn't get involved, this was before my time, but they'd go all over the state, putting on these degrees – working degrees, working the first, working the second, working the third. And some of these guys would memorize things, and they could speak for hours.

EB: Wow.

GJ: On memory alone.

EB: That's amazing.



GJ: It was just amazing.

EB: But you never traveled yourself to different lodges?

GJ: No, that time had passed by then. By when I joined. Yep.

EB: So what are you the most proud of? As an Oddfellow?

GJ: Most proud...personally? Oh, I'm, like I just said before, I'm just proud to be an Oddfellow. It's a great feeling to know that you, you know, maybe leave the world a little bit better than when you found it. That's probably an old worn-out cliché, but, I just, just feel that, and I've been fortunate to be asked to be an Oddfellow. I just like it.

EB: Great. Is there anything else you'd like to share, any other memories or stories?

GJ: No, I guess, no. I guess not.

EB: Well thank you. That was great.

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