

**A Tape Recording of an interview which Ray Wiswell had with Carl Sonnichsen (aged about 85) about Madison's salt meadows at the turn of the century**

The place and date of this recording is Madison, Conn. on November 11, 1965, Veterans Day. My name is Ray Wiswell, currently President of the Madison Land Conservation Trust. Meeting with me is one of Madison's longtime residents, Carl Sonnichsen. The purpose of this meeting is to record some of the facts and personal experiences which Carl has in his mind concerning the past history of the tidal marshland in the East River and other marshland areas of Madison. As an introduction to our discussion, let me say that the Madison Land Conservation Trust is a private, non-profit corporation organized less than two years ago. It is designed, and its main purpose, is to assist in the preservation of natural resources of Madison for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. One of the means for accomplishing this is for the Trust to acquire ownership of land through gifts or purchase in order to assure that it will be kept permanently in its natural state. For this purpose the Trust has already acquired 37 acres of tidal marshland in the East River marshes of Madison. These 37 acres, made up of a number of separate smaller parcels, are only a small part of the entire acreage of marshes in this area. They are, however, a start, and the Trust means to obtain more of this acreage as it becomes available. Thus the marshes take on an active interest for all the members of the Conservation Trust as we look ahead to the years to come. They also take on additional interest for some of us at least when we look back to the years gone by and see the perhaps minor but significant use made of these marshes by the farming community. So it is about this use of the marshes by the farmers of the area that our talk here is principally concerned. Now let me introduce Carl Sonnichsen, one of Madison's elder and highly respected citizens. Greetings to you, Carl, and I am very pleased to be here and discuss this matter with you. I know you have a lot to give us. We are going to start in, Carl, by giving us a little bit of your background.

Well, of course I was born in Germany and came to this country as a small child and grew up here in Madison and worked. At that time farming was the main in this locality and I worked on an old farm for a man by the name of Moses Stannard, who has long since passed, and he done everything the old-fashioned way. In other words, if there is a hard way to do anything, that is the way it had to be done. Well, I was young and strong at that time, it took all I had--but referring to the salt marsh--

Well, wait, I want to ask you first, Carl, of course your younger days were definitely on the farm, and we are talking about the marshes. Now what use did the farmers make of the marshes?

Well, at that time the marsh hay was considered quite important. It was used for many purposes. It fed the cattle, it bedded the various types of livestock--pigs, cows and oxen and even horses--and it was used to bank up the houses to prevent any frost from entering into cellars, because the cellars were used for storage of the farm produce, as we all know, and it was considered a great

value as fertilizer. You could put it on the land without going through the barnyard, it was used for bedding right out of the field right onto the land, and it would produce good crops. The land through this part of New England has needed something always to make it produce good crops, and salt hay was considered a necessity to raise good crops.

We call these places marshes. The old timers called them what?

Always called them salt meadows.

And it's a fact, isn't it, Carl, that most of the farmers had from one to four or five or more acres of marshland?

Yes, everybody that farmed considered that he had to have a piece of marshland just the same as he had to have a piece of woodland. Marshland was important to everybody.

In fact they came from miles back. Is that right?

They came from as far away as Rockland and North Madison to cut the grass and haul it way up there, an awful job, but it was that important that they did it.

I understand that there are different kinds of grasses in the marshes, not like the grasses we get on the upland meadow, is it?

No. There are four distinct types of salt marsh grass and each had a separate use and purpose. The tall sedge on the river bank grew up to be three and four feet high, and that had a special use, and then there's the small sedge, that was sedge we called that. Then there was short sedge that grew on the flat meadows, and then there was the red salt, which was very tough and hard to cut, and then there was the black grass. Those were the four dominating types of salt grass that were harvested at that time.

What was considered to be the best?

Black grass was far the best. That was good feeding hay. Cattle would eat it readily. The other grass, the tall grass they wouldn't eat so readily. But the black grass grew more abundant and was much better. It was more valuable in every way. Black grass meadow was considered much more valuable than meadows with the other types of grass on them.

I understand, Carl, that the getting of hay in the marshes, wherever it was, was done pretty much the same way. Your experience as a young man was in the Hammonasset area. It would be much the same thing in the East River area. Why don't you tell us how you went about getting the hay in?

Well, of course, on the farm when it come haying time it was "Go hitch up the horse to the lumber wagon, we're going down to the

meadows today." And while I was getting the horse ready, the women were putting up a lunch and he was loading on the necessary tools to cut the hay and put in an armload of hay for the old horse to eat while we were down there, and he went and got his jug of cider, and from where we worked the meadows we were going to work on, it took an hour's time to get there and an hour's time to get home. That was two hours lost out of the day, but we worked hard while we were down there, fighting mosquitoes and greenheads and mowing at a good clip all the time we were there. When it come noontime we sat under a tree with our jug of cider and lunch, and as soon as we were through eating we got back on the meadows again. We had to change the scythe at least once in the morning and once in the afternoon because salt grass dulls scythes very easily, and we had to take all those dull scythes home and sharpen them before we came back the next day. Around 5 o'clock we loaded everything into the old wagon and started for home. We had our chores waiting for us when we got home, and had to sharpen the tools to get ready for the next day.

Now you had to leave this grass on the meadows to dry before you could do anything with it. Was it a kind of risky business leaving it there?

Well, yes, it had to stay there from two to four days to get dry enough before we could rake and then we were in a hurry to rake it and get it ashore. This process was something again. After it was raked and put into heaps we slid two what we called hay poles under the heaps that a man could hold.

Carl, how big was one of these heaps?

Well, they would be near shoulder high and there would be 100 to 140 pounds of hay in each heap, and a man took ahold of these poles at each end and we walked ashore regardless of the mosquitoes and greenheads gnawing on us on the way out.

In other words you have two poles, do I understand? Two poles that you slid underneath the heap and you picked it up and two men took that into the upland?

Took it to higher ground and this was after it was dried and we picked it up.

Did you rake it by hand?

Oh, everything was done by hand--mowing, raking, bringing it ashore. That was before we realized that anybody found out that horses could be worked on the meadows by fastening clogs to their feet, which kept them above ground when they was on soft meadow.

Clogs on their feet. Carl, do you want to describe?

Well, yes. They were a wooden device that was bolted to each horse's hoof and when he had them on his hoof was probably three times normal size and he could walk where it was soft without any danger. Then we could take a horse and wagon out on the meadow and load hay right onto the wagon and bring it ashore and unload it and go after more. That saved most all the pole carrying hay and then later we could use a mowing machine on soft meadows although it took a good machine, the blade had to be sharp to cut salt grass, but I have done a lot of that too with clogs on my horses' feet and with a good team you could mow lots of hay much easier than we ever did before.

Getting back to the drying of the grass on the meadow, there was a danger?

Oh, yes. We had storms them days even more than we do now, and a good northeast wind would bring the tide water over the meadows sometimes to a depth of a foot or more and it would wash the hay in various places, sometimes carrying heaps of hay over onto another man's meadow and then there was always an argument who owned what hay. And it created ill feeling sometimes that ran in the family for years, feuding over a little salt hay that had been lost through the tide having carried the hay from one meadow to another, and also a lot of hay went out the river. When the tide went down this hay was floating, it went right out to where we never saw it any more.

That was a real loss.

Real loss, a big loss. We worked hard to get it and then didn't have any hay.

I understand, Carl, that they also sometimes stacked that hay on the meadow and left it there until, did you tell me, the ground was frozen--this was in the earlier days?

Yes, till the meadows froze hard. That's another story again. The meadows that were too far away from high land, you couldn't pole the hay that far, nearly a half a mile--they build what they call a staek bottoms. They drove stakes down and around a circular area probably three feet above the meadow so the tide could rise and fall under the stack of hay and then piled the stacked hay on top of this flat bottom maybe four loads of hay on one stack, and they had to weight it down to keep the wind from blowing the hay away. They threw a wire over the stack, two or three of them in fact, and hung rocks or any kind of a weight on each end of the wire to keep the wind from blowing the hay away. Then that stayed there until extreme cold weather in the winter when the ground was froze, zero weather, the meadows was hard, then you could take a pair of cattle and a wagon and go out there and load up a load and bring it ashore right on top of frozen meadow. In fact that's the only way you could get it off the meadow, was to stack it there when it was cut, then wait till the

meadow was froze hard and go out there without any danger of getting stuck or mired, load the hay on and bring it ashore.

I expect it had to get pretty cold before the mud was frozen quite hard.

Coldest, most disagreeable thing in the world. We had to go down there when it was bitter cold zero weather and the wind blowing across those meadows and you couldn't hardly handle the hay--it would blow away from you, you had to sit on every forkful that was put on the wagon, and at last you got a load on and tied it on with rope, roped it down, then you were ready to go, and boy, you were half froze before you got where you could get plenty of exercise when you got on hard ground.

Now on the meadows, and I suppose this is true of the East River meadows as well as the Hammonasset meadows, there were roads laid out, cart paths where they could go with their loads over other men's land, isn't that right?

Well, there were right of ways. If one person bought a meadow way down beyond other holders, naturally he had a right of way to get to his meadow. It wasn't injurious after grass was cut because it didn't hurt the ground or the meadow to drive over it to speak of. He didn't like it if the grass wasn't cut because if he knocked some of his grass down he couldn't harvest it.

I know some of the old records that I have looked up refer to causeways or pathways along the rivers and along the creeks. I assume that those were paths that they used regularly to get from one meadow to another.

There was always a way to get to a meadow. If a man bought a piece of meadow anywhere at all there was always a provision made that he could get to it and get away, get his hay away.

You recall we were down in East River meadows not long ago and we talked about what they called a causeway which ran apparently from the end of Ox Pasture Road across into the meadow. The old records called it the Bartlett Bridge, you remember.

Yes, I well remember the bridge. I remember the road and I knew why it was there, and it went to Cedar Island and joining meadows all around there. It was used a lot during the latter part of the summer. Everybody went on the meadows. In fact, I have been informed that there were as many as 100 men working on the East River meadows at one time, and this causeway --

One hundred men, you say?

Yes, 100 men at least, probably more. They were spread all over a mile of meadows there or more. It was an important operation,

you had to do it when the tides were right, when the weather was right, when other farm work wasn't pressing, then you hurried down, cut the meadow grass and struggled hard to get it ashore before any storm developed. If a storm did develop, you had the results that I just mentioned. This causeway going to Cedar Island was used for those that used the island and meadows joining.

The causeway also, I believe, went down the river and possibly up the river. Someone has told me that they used that as sort of a pent road to help haul boats up the river. Did you ever hear of that?

Well, of course we all know the old records show that the East River up here by the Post Road was used as a dock. Cargo vessels came in there every year and some of the time they had to use a horse or some means of getting the vessel up the river. It would be almost impossible to sail a vessel up the river, being so crooked. At one time she'd have a fair wind and then she'd go around the bend, the wind would be pushing her back again. So it was necessary to get her up, I expect, by some means of towing the vessel in places, and this causeway you speak of along the river bank no doubt was used for that purpose.

Looking at the records, I find that there's a piece of meadow way down at the lower end of the East River meadows called the School Meadow. Have you ever had any experience with that?

Not any more than it was always considered a very good meadow and I think in early years it was sold to whoever did the most for it, the hay I mean, and the proceeds were donated to the school system in Guilford. Those meadows belong to Guilford. They are still there.

They are still there, and I understand that Guilford pays taxes on that little piece of meadow right along, even though they are not of any value today.

Guess that's true of quite a lot of that marshland there.

Cedar Island is quite an interesting outcropping of rock on the banks of the East River. I understand it's quite deep right there and there is a ledge that goes right down into the water. It is about an acre in size and has considerable growth of cedar and other trees on it, and I think you have a little story about going in there as a boy to play. I think other boys have done the same thing.

Yes, boys' nature has never changed I don't think. Human nature is about the same now as it always was, and boys do get into mischief. My boyhood days there was a quarry on the ledge, and the quarry --

When was that, about the 1890's?

Well, before the turn of the century, yes, just about 1890 - 1892, I can't pinpoint the date, but I was probably 9 or 10 years old, and vessels came in there and they had a derrick there to swing the quarried rock out onto the deck of the vessel and they had a shed there that contained all their tools, they had blasting powder there and had a forge and some coal, and an accident occurred --

Did you ever happen to actually see this in operation?

No, I never was there on weekdays. It was Saturday or Sunday when we were there. I understand there was an accident happened there. One of the cables holding the derrick up had rusted and broke when they were loading the stone and the derrick came down and one man was killed, as I understand it. That was the story then. Anyway, when we were there the derrick had been abandoned, the quarry had been abandoned and all the tools were left there, including the powder, the forge, the little shed, etc. and it was a field day for us boys to raise the dickens with all their tools and everything there. In fact, we even spilled powder out onto the face of the ledge in a circular and a snakelike formation and left a pound or two of powder in a can and then lit the lower end, the far end of the powder, and saw it snake along the edge of the ledge face and blow up the can. Boy, ~~that was~~ that was a lot of fun! And then we put some coal in the forge and heated pieces of iron until they were boiling red hot and threw it into a bucket of water and see the bucket of water boil like a geyser. That was plenty fun. Anyway, toward the end after we had exhausted ourselves and most means of knowing what to do, my brother got up on the building. He was going to make a speech and he got as far as "Well, I hope", he says, and us other boys were down below, the building was kind of rickety, and we pushed the building over and his attention was diverted more to saving his neck before it hit the ground than it was to making the speech. So that ended the building, and so far as I know now that was the last time we were down there. We had a lot of fun there, and I don't think we hurt anybody because the tools and everything had been abandoned. The owner evidently had given up all interest in the quarry and everything that was there. His drill steel and his sledge hammers and his forge and the little old building and everything was there, and I guess so far as I know it stayed there until it was carried off by mammals or what. Anyway, we had lots of fun there.

I know we found no evidence of any tools or equipment the other day when we were down there at Cedar Island.

Not at all, because this was over a span of 70 years, and 70 years is a long time for even iron to lay around in the salt air.

It seems to me, Carl, that we have pretty well covered your experiences in the salt meadows. Now, while I am here, I think

we could perhaps touch on one or two other things, and one is the Ox Pasture. The Ox Pasture Road--what is the significance of that and what was it used for? I believe, if I am not wrong, that all the farmers who used the lower meadows had to use the Ox Pasture road to get there and they went across what was called the Bartlett Bridge over the Bailey Creek. Can you tell us anything about how this happened to get the name Ox Pasture Road?

Yes, you're right, all the meadow owners in that part of the area had to use this Ox Pasture Road and it was so called because at one time in Colonial times and later it was a public pasture. Since it was enclosed on two sides by tide water rivers that were barriers the cattle couldn't cross, and the only fence that had to be built was on a small portion of the east side and on the Post Road end of the so-called public pasture, and in those days people were allowed to put a team of oxen, that meant four oxen or two oxen and one horse, and they were limited to that amount, and it was always known as Ox Pasture up to the present time. And at that time it was a very prominent road because it was used so much. All that went down to Cedar Island and the meadows around there all had to cross over the Ox Pasture Road and it enters the public lands down there at the end of Mungertown Road and they had a gate there and you went through a gate and then you continued on and that was public pasture up until perhaps some time before the Civil War.

Part of that road was over the lower end of what is now called Garnet Park Road. Is that not right?

Yes, the lower end, I should say after you continued down the entrance of the road perhaps a half a mile, it come into what is now Garnet Park Road and that runs on down almost to the bridge. In fact, it does go to the bridge.

Some of the old records call that area down there by the Bartlett Bridge the Ox Pasture Point. They refer to Ox Pasture Point as a property.

There is a little high land there that was later used for farming and today it is used to build houses on and it soon will be no one will know where Ox Pasture Road is or ever was or anything about it. But all the old records in Guilford and Madison referred to that area as Ox Pasture Road.

While I am here, Carl, I think you'd like to put on record some information that you have about a so-called canal that was put in somewhere down here along the Neck River, and I wonder if you would tell us about it.

Well I am not sure--there is no record when the canal was built--it was a big project--and no one knows hardly what it was for nor who built it nor when. I assume it was built about 100 years ago and for the purpose of diverting fresh water out of the Neck River so that it could be seeded to oysters and made into an oyster bed. Since fresh water is injurious to oysters and it was



necessary to get the fresh water out of the river so they could use it for oysters and they found after diverting the water down through the canal into the Long Island Sound through a shorter way that the oyster business wasn't feasible. The mud, the sediment that the fresh water had been washing away over the years settled over the oysters since no fresh water and no stream of water ran down there and the oysters just didn't grow, they just died right there. In other words, the project was a complete failure. Oysters didn't grow there, and then they tore down the small dam that they had to divert the water down the canal and let the river run down its normal channel through the marshes, and today very few know that there is a canal or there ever was one there, but there was and it was in use for a while.

Is there any evidence of the old canal bed?

Yes, the old canal is still there with the walls stoned up with good stones and trees growing up in the bottom of the canal. It is very definite and will be for another hundred years, I expect.

Now that ran from the Neck River over into the Sound somewhere in the general area of what is known as Canoe Harbor.

That is correct.

And I think we said that it started up there say somewhere across from Beach Avenue.

Yes, it was right near the old Bassett property opposite Beach Avenue, just a little below it. There was the canal and you could walk right in it.

It went under the Neck Road?

Yes, it did. It had a wooden bridge over the Neck Road when it was first in use when the water ran there, but after it was abandoned they took the wooden bridge out, filled the road up and that part of the canal you don't see any more. All you see is both sides of the road.

There are no records?

No, that's the funny thing. Nobody knows, there are no records of anything that has ever been done there, who done it, what it cost or even when it was done. There is very little known about it. I am glad now that it can be put into condition so that most people know we had a canal in Madison and it's still there, although it isn't in use.

Carl, this has all been a very interesting afternoon for me and I am sure that the records that we've made here will be of value to someone later on who may want to go back over some of the personal experiences and human interest stories about the marshes and these other points we have just discussed. Thank you very much, Carl.

Thank you.

Before I leave, Carl, I must add ~~asa~~ a postscript of this interesting discussion that the idea of tape recording historical things that people can talk about and tell us about was given to me by Charlotte Poirot, who is the librarian of the Madison Library, and I think this has shown that the idea has some real merit. So we can credit her with this thing that we have done today.

I think that will be fine.