

Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM JOSEPH GRIFFIN

Oswegatchie, New York
May 19 and 20, 1958

by Charles D. Bonsted
Forest History Foundation, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Griffin was interviewed in the living room of his house, which he said had been built about ten years previously, after the earlier one on the site had burned. He was dressed in a business suit and sat at ease on a sofa or lounge chair, arising occasionally to move about with a cane. No one else was present in the room.

The subject was cordial and unhesitating in his responses. He did not consult sources other than his memory. Anyway, he has no records now, he said. His hearing, vision, and speech were clear. All in all, his physical and mental well-being and the vigor of his personality at age ninety-five impressed the interviewer.

The interviewer explains his use of leading questions by the desire to record details and nuances which the subject had volunteered during talk preceding the recording sessions.

Mr. Griffin was recommended as a subject by acquaintances of his who had inadvertently telescoped the lives and experiences of the subject and his father. His connection with the unique cooperative marketing of a disappearing forest product, maple syrup and derivatives, characteristic only of North America, was discovered during the course of the preliminary interviewing. Mr. Griffin understandably regards himself as a farmer and dairyman in whose life the forest and wood have had a relatively small economic role. It is evidence of his cordiality and courtesy to the forest history seeker that he nevertheless willingly allowed the interview to be confined to that role.

The interview was done at two sessions with break-ins for rest: it sticks to the timber topic pretty well: but the sum of it shows the subject as a farmer observer of the changing timber economy true of his part of the United States -- from logging spruce and pine, then hemlock (first only for its bark for a local tannery's use, then for both its bark and logs), then hardwoods (maple, beech, oak, birch), next pulpwood-size softwoods, and finally today's hardwood pulpwood. Implicit is the story of timber "mined" by successive kinds of timber buyers-users who were given ardent cooperation by the farmer owners of much of the land. As subject himself volunteered, such owners gave no thought or practice to selectivity or care for future harvests in their focus on present cash, a focus understandable in view of the slender income perennially true of farming on land recognized in modern times as agriculturally marginal and best suited for timber growing.

Arrangements for the interview were made through the subject's son, William Griffin of Star Lake, St. Lawrence County, New York. William Griffin at the time was supervisor of the town of Fine like his grandfather, the immigrant Michael Griffin, in 1854.

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BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, you say you were born on June 29, 1863. Would you begin by telling how your father came to this country?

GRIFFIN: In 1835 my father, Michael Griffin, came to America from his native land, Ireland -- the southern tip of the County Cork. He landed in New York and worked southward to the state of Georgia, there finding employment of probably some public nature. He remained for five years. At that time he had a dream that his father had died in Ireland. This took him back to his native heath, there to find that his dream was true. When my father came to America, his father had watched from some high eminence the ship that took him -- sat there and watched it out of sight. My grandfather was never just the same thereafter; it affected his mind and he died.

BONSTED: Your father, you said, worked at some public employment.

GRIFFIN: Yes, I don't know just what but those were slavery days and he worked along with slaves and everything else. He was quite familiar with the slaves and their treatment from their masters.

BONSTED: You believe then that he was on a plantation?

GRIFFIN: Not necessarily on but near plantations so that he knew the planters, some of them -- of course, I suppose not very intimately, but he knew some of them and knew the conditions.

BONSTED: Do you think that his work was related to anything that he had done in Ireland?

GRIFFIN: No, I think not.

BONSTED: Then he returned to Ireland at thirty?

GRIFFIN: Yes. He remained less than a year and married my mother, Elizabeth Donovan. After having spent those five years in America he couldn't endure living under the laws of England and the oppression that the Irish had at that time; therefore he came back to America. They

were seven weeks on the ocean, being driven hither and yon by the winds, then they came by boat up the St. Lawrence and down the river to Lake Ontario and landed in Oswego. They spent that first winter working in Brewerton, which is a little ways from Syracuse on the Oswego River. There in the spring they came in contact with this land agent who was seeking residents for the wild, big tracts of land -- forest land up here -- to open it up.

BONSTED: Was your father told that it was forest land?

GRIFFIN: I presume so; I don't think they would deceive in that way. However, it was land that they could get that was all their own, mind you -- for a dollar an acre -- and that opportunity appealed so they came. The two families had bought the 100 acres of land on which I am here and on which I was born.

BONSTED: I see. Mr. Griffin, who owned the land the agent was selling?

GRIFFIN: Names don't come easily. The deed was signed by John Fine. They borrowed of Judge Fine, but the first tract was part of Macomb's purchase. Yes, it was Judge John Fine that gave my father his first deed.

BONSTED: For the land arranged through the agent at Brewerton?

GRIFFIN: Yes. The two men -- Michael Griffin and James Welch -- I suppose they bought on contract probably. Of course, they had nothing else to buy with. My father paid off the contract in 12 years, and that was for this first 100 acres that I'm living on now. They came by horse to the town of Edwards. From there there was practically nothing but a trail through the forest, and they came the last ten miles with an ox team -- two families, all their goods and chattels on one ox sleigh.

BONSTED: How much did they have?

GRIFFIN: Very little, you can imagine. They came to an abandoned log hut that stood right back there where I have a hen house now, with the earth for the floor and greased paper for the windows -- a little hut for two families. The Welch family were married earlier and had two children, so there were six people in that little hut. I don't believe it would be more than 15 by 20 feet.

BONSTED: What time of year was that?

GRIFFIN: It was on the ninth day of May, 1842. These huts were built and abandoned by squatters who had come previously. Evidently the only

thing the squatters could sell was soda (or what they called black salt) that they'd get from burning timber, you know -- the ashes of the coals. They could sell about ten barrels below here. Therefore, they had to clear a little plot to burn that stuff to get a little butter upon which to live.

BONSTED; Was the burning of the wood for the ashes the main reason for cutting the timber at that time?

GRIFFIN: The main reason, no other.

BONSTED; They weren't attempting to clear it for farming, too?

GRIFFIN: I don't believe the squatters' intentions were very much intent on farming. It was quite different for my father and Mr. Welch. The same man that brought them there in '42 came again the next year. I suppose he had a sympathetic streak in his nature, and seeing the condition that they were in, offered to take them back. They could give up their contract and he'd take them back to Oswego. But no, they were made of different metal. They had to stay. My brother Thomas was born a few months after they arrived here that first year.

BONSTED: Had they had a tough year?

GRIFFIN: They had their health. I never heard a complaint in all my life, but how could it be otherwise than tough?

BONSTED: You mean there wasn't anything to make a living from except in taking ashes? ,

GRIFFIN: No, they never indulged in that. My father fortunately had a little money. He was very industrious and saving, and a dollar at that time meant quite a little different than it does today. And he had saved, when he went back first, \$500 in gold from his work in Georgia. So, out of that, of course, was transportation two ways so he couldn't have had but little left; however, he did have a little of that gold when he came here. And it helped him very much for the first few years until they could have something to sell.

BONSTED; Do you know how much he paid for the land?

GRIFFIN; One hundred dollars -- a dollar an acre. Well, my father could see that two growing families couldn't be living in this small hut together without discord, so he proposed to Mr. Welch that one or the other buy or sell, that they'd have to separate. Well, the sun was shining and all the conditions were good. It surprised Mr. Welch but my father

insisted so he bought Mr. Welch's interest which, of course, wasn't but little, and my father and mother stayed.

BONSTED: Did the Welches go back?

GRIFFIN: No, the Welches went down toward Gouverneur, a farming district, and worked for a couple of years, and finally came back and bought a farm three miles below here, and they lived and died on that farm. Each family had eight children. Out of all those families -- Welches, Griffins, and Sullivans -- I'm all that's left.

BONSTED: Then your father, after buying Mr. Welch out, had 200 acres?

GRIFFIN: No, there was only 100 acres. They bought it together.

BONSTED: And there was a lot of clearing to be done?

GRIFFIN: By men who knew nothing about clearing land. There were no saws or anything of that kind. The ax and the shovel and the hoe were their tools and implements for farming.

BONSTED: Had your father any experience in the woods before?

GRIFFIN: No experience whatever. Their nearest base of supplies was a store ten miles away and when they did grow a little something -- corn or a little wheat -- they had to cut it with a sickle. I don't know how in the world they ever cleaned the wheat but they did it -- maybe in the wind or some other way. Then they had to carry that on their backs to where they could get it ground, and then return. You know, the real necessities of life are not great if you confine yourself. Assuredly, they were confined to the necessities of life, but never in later years when they did have a little something was there ever a word of regret, not one. They had faith, too. My father and mother were Catholics. The first child born, Thomas, was nearly a year old when this man came back the second year with a team of horses, and they had an opportunity to get out to where they could get this baby baptized. They rode with him to Watertown, which was 60 miles at that time. It's shortened up a little bit since with new roads. Anyway, they had that baby baptized and walked back, carrying a year-old baby. Now, who would do that today?

BONSTED: Did other children come along?

GRIFFIN: They did, they did. I had three sisters and they never married. As soon as they partially matured, my older sister began teaching at fifteen on a permit in a little Lincoln log cabin on this farm -- the first in this town.

BONSTED: Who were her pupils?

GRIFFIN: Before my father came up here a man named Brown had been induced to come (from Vermont, I think) in the early thirties, and the landowners had built him a frame house and a little sawmill by which lumber could be cut out for any prospective settlers. It was at the crossing of the river -- a rapid stream. Brown had quite a family. They have no record of this -- it's just my opinion that one of the conditions on which Brown came was that some provision be made for the education of his family. So in a little log house (on our property now) his family and one or two of the oldest in my father's family went to school.

BONSTED: Was your sister the first teacher in this immediate neighborhood?

GRIFFIN: One of the first. Cornelius Carter of South Edwards (he was quite a character) was the first to teach that school, and my sister Kate, or Katherine, later got from him a permit to teach school and she taught until she died. When she died, in Truxton Hospital in Utica as the result of an operation, she had taught for 40 years. She taught in Minnesota, and she taught in Ohio, and she taught in Maryland. She'd gone to those places to visit people we'd known here, and, of course, money being scarce she'd teach school wherever she happened to be. My three sisters were teachers and not being married, no matter where they were teaching or what they were doing, there was never but one home and that was here.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, Mr. Brown's sawmill was the first one in the area that you know of?

GRIFFIN: The first that my father knew of. This road was the first trail in town through from Harrisville to South Edwards. Nothing crossed the river; there were no bridges or ferries or anything else. It was practically the end of the road at Browns Falls. The sawmill was a little primitive sawmill.

BONSTED: Up and down.?

GRIFFIN: Yes.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, I'll put down on the tape what we checked ourselves on. When they met in Oswego they had come to this country on different ships. Welch had two children and your parents were newlyweds. The children born to your parents were in order: first Thomas, who died as an infant, then Katherine, Julia, John, Elizabeth, Florence, Albert and

yourself in 1863, the children having been born over a span of 21 years. Now, all of the children, you say, except yourself have gone to other parts of the country or the state temporarily at various times but they all regarded New York State, as home and the original home-
stead as their home. You spoke of Albert as having gone to Lewiston, Minnesota, for a period of five or six years. Was it because of the mining or the wheat industry,?

GRIFFIN: One time he bought some land up on the Mesabi Range, but years went by and he finally let it go. Probably today it would be worth some money.

BONSTED: It was one year after your father and mother had been here, and a rather hard year, that they had a chance to quit. Then the next year Daniel Truax bought the next 100 acres, probably through the same land agent?

GRIFFIN: I presume so, and probably at the same purchase price.

BONSTED: Then would you tell me about the later history of the Truaxes?

GRIFFIN. Mr. Truax was a man of some ability. By a strange coincidence the first three supervisors of the town of Fine were Brown, Truax and my father -- three neighbors -- and they were the first supervisors of the town of Fine.

BONSTED: That would have been in what year?

GRIFFIN: The town was organized in 1844. Brown was first, then Truax, and then my father in '54. The Truaxes later went to Minnesota.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, you said that the squatters that were on the land when your father and the Welches came here had burned timber for ashes.

GRIFFIN: Hardwood timber. Mostly beech and maple, probably, because that was the predominant timber on the highlands here then.

BONSTED: And they took that about ten miles to Shawville?

GRIFFIN: Carried it on their backs; there was no other way to get it there.

BONSTED: And bartered it for food and other commodities?

GRIFFIN: I've heard my father say that sometimes they probably bought some drink, too. And that didn't help their case any.

BONSTEP: You're not familiar with the use of ashes beyond that point?

GRIFFIN: Well, it's potash. I don't know just how it was chemically treated after that, but that was the crude form.

BONSTEP: And you say that Mr. Shaw was a pretty shrewd business man?

GRIFFIN: He took mortgages. I have an old book here which shows it was mostly for store bills or something because the entries were for five dollars and some cents or ten dollars and something. He'd have a mortgage right down to the letter and mortgage their growing crops or anything they might have -- a pair of steers, guns, compasses, or kettles. Almost everybody had one of those kettles.

BONSTEP: And you think probably those kettles were made over in the town of Rossie?

GRIFFIN: Where the iron mines were started there early, early, early. I'm just assuming that they were made there because everybody apparently had them, and it would be naturally where those kettles were made.

BONSTEP: You told me that Mr. Brown at his mill simply made lumber for local use.

GRIFFIN: That's all, and in a very small way, because I don't remember but one barn that was up here on the old Truax place -- and there was a date cut in the union (gable) of that barn, 1846 -- and that barn stood there a long, long time.

BONSTEP: And your father had relatively little income from the timber?

GRIFFIN: Very little because there was no market until after his death.

BONSTEP: No transportation so no market. His own enterprise, then, was devoted to raising cows?

GRIFFIN: Farming, clearing land and raising food for the cattle; that was **his business.**

BONSTEP: Your father died when?

GRIFFIN: In 1881 when I was eighteen years old.

BONSTEP: Had you begun to work at farming or in the woods before then?

GRIFFIN: Oh, I had worked some. If young men of today did the work that I did in my teens they wouldn't be in so much mischief as they are.

BONSTED: What did you do first?

GRIFFIN: My first work, except for farm work, was in lumbering, drawing logs to the Oswegatchie River to be floated to the mills in Gouverneur. That was when I was seventeen. I went out in the morning before daylight with my horses and drove in those logs, getting the munificent sum of three dollars a day -- from long before daylight to after dark.

BONSTED: You would have gotten less if you had boarded at the camp, I suppose?

GRIFFIN: Oh, yes. The small teams engaged by the lumber merchants would get \$1.50 or \$1.75 a day and their keep at the lumber camps. I had my own team. Nights I stayed home. I stayed one night at the camp. It was difficult, not having had experience in lumbering, and the day's work was three trips and a half from the woods to the river bank where they banked the logs. These logs were spruce and pine, and they were floated to the mills in Gouverneur.

The camp was up here on Skate Creek. I started my first day, and it being a three and a half trip day, my sleighs were loaded overnight that first night. I hauled them out near the camp where the snow was packed down and left them there -- a cold winter's night. I didn't sleep much that night, the camp being a new experience, and I went out there in the moonlight and hitched my horses to that load. It was frozen to the earth because I hadn't put something under the runners, you know, so I broke several things there. Finally the loaders came out with their peavies -- they were going to load the teams. -- and they helped me loosen up the runners so I got out of there. But I had some things to repair and I was a little ashamed to come home so I went to the blacksmith shop in the village of Fine and got repaired. There I ran onto a man who was the boss of another lumbering industry in the same region and he induced me to go back with him.

BONSTED: Why?

GRIFFIN: I don't know. I was rather disgusted with the place I was in so I went there and finished the week. I think Christmas came on Saturday or Friday, so that night I came home. The next Sunday the overseer of the first lumber camp came out to see me. He called me "Cuffy" -- I don't know why.

He said, "If I'd seen you going out when you did you wouldn't have gone." ITNow, he said, "you come back and you can go right in and have your dinner at the camp and sleep at home and work from there." So I did and I stayed until the last log was logged. That was my first experience lumbering, the winter I was seventeen years old. I began a little before Christmas and we probably finished in March.

BONSTED: What were they logging?

GRIFFIN: Spruce.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, between the tapes you have told me that the lumber that floated down the Oswegatchie, after you had stacked it on the banks, went to Gouverneur and it was milled nearby at a place called Natural Darn. There was a sawmill there and it was operated by Weston, Dean and Aldrich. This was later the site of a paper mill known as the Rushmore Paper Company. Now, after you were seventeen what did you do?

GRIFFIN: After I was seventeen my interests were in farming with my father. No, my father died when I was eighteen, but I continued on the farm with my mother and my sisters largely, when they were home, and it was always their home. Then in the early nineties I engaged with Newton Aldrich in the operation of the hardwood mill, which was located near my father's old property. After three or four years of operating, the mill was sold and I returned to the farm, giving the farm my whole attention. The crops were hay, oats, potatoes and corn.

BONSTED: Did you do any timbering on your own?

GRIFFIN: Yes, I lumbered and sold the maple and much of the pulpwood until the marketable supply of timber on the farm was exhausted.

BONSTED: Did you follow any practices of selective cutting?

GRIFFIN: To some extent, largely through selling the stumpage on an acreage, the whole stumpage of a certain variety -- for instance, all the maple stumpage on a certain tract of land.

BONSTED: Do you remember what some of the prices were -- to illustrate how it changed over the years?

GRIFFIN: My largest sale was a lot price standing on a certain tract of land, not knowing what the stumpage would be. Of course, the buyer would have a general knowledge, I suppose, after looking over the timber about what the entire stumpage measured by thousand feet would be, but how much that was I don't know. I sold it for a lump sum. This was about 1945, and was maple.

BONSTED: You had tapped trees, hadn't you?

GRIFFIN: Yes, many years engaged in the sugar business. Of course, in later years (about 1922) there was a cooperative, a state cooperative, formed of which I happened to have been the president for 22 years. I was the first president of that cooperative.

BONSTED: How did that come into formation?

GRIFFIN: Through the efforts of Cornell. At that time all over the state many cooperatives were formed on different crops that were produced. Many never succeeded, and the maple producers came near going under due to their first year's operation.

BONSTED: Why was that?

GRIFFIN: I always blame Cornell. They were responsible for getting these cooperatives started. They were cooperatives made up of people like myself, farmers who had little knowledge of business, and I think at Cornell they should have taken it on themselves to have guided the heads of those cooperatives and seen them through their infancy, put them on their feet, seen that they didn't make big mistakes, but that they failed to do. We canvassed the whole state. Of course, there was no money. We got a little money from each member and that was all exhausted in making this canvass. Maple products at that time were produced at a ridiculously low price, and that was the purpose of the cooperative -- to help us out. We got 150,000 gallons of maple syrup that first year. Our headquarters were at Syracuse. We were provided with a manager selected by Cornell -- a competent man in a way but he fooled us all. We were going to get rich at once through the sale of our products. He bought equipment at the factory for processing this stuff -- like whole carloads of individual bottles for individual service. No money to pay for that but the product was there in the storehouse at Syracuse -- 150,000 gallons to pay for all that and to draw on. As a result, they issued notes really -- a protnisetopay, three months notes. Well, the banks accepted them and renewed them and renewed them until they got tired of it. Finally, we had to sell that in bulk at a low price and it left us practically stranded.

BONSTED: Had these 150,000 gallons been processed by the individual farmers?

GRIFFIN: By the individual farmers and shipped to market in steel containers, 30 and 50 gallon containers. We had rented storage space in Syracuse

and expected to process this stuff there. The next year, instead of 150,000 gallons, we got three or four thousand from a few loyal members. The others were all discouraged and were cursing the cooperative up hill and down hill. Well, we finally worked out of it by leaving Syracuse, which was a central point for the state, and coming to Gouverneur. We got an old building that had been used by a cheese company and cut expenses to the bone until finally we got renewed confidence. There was the Federal Land Bank established by Franklin Roosevelt in Springfield, Massachusetts, where we could borrow at a low rate of interest (two and a half per cent) and we built up a good business again, and continued until quite recently. After 22 years. I was getting old and I thought it was time for me to resign and get out and leave it to younger men, younger and better men, which I did. They ran along very successfully under a different management until two years ago (1956) when the American Tobacco Company ceased buying the low products (No. 2 and No.3) of maple syrup. That cut off our markets entirely for that and we're down now to a few thousand gallons. I go now by invitation every year to their annual meeting, so I'm keeping in touch, but I'm afraid they're near the end. They depend largely now on retail trade and that is growing. They ship all over the country and some to England, but I'm fearful because of their indebtedness. They've got a new plant down on No. 11 north of Syracuse -- a very nice place, and with a through route there it makes a pretty good retail market for the public. I'm hopeful that they can swing it, but I'm afraid of it.

BONSTED: If they do swing it they would get more money for the product, wouldn't they, than selling it to the tobacco company?

GRIFFIN: Oh, sure. Well, the tobacco company took only the lower grades but they finally got good prices for that. Without that market they couldn't do much of anything. We were put way back to where we started from, almost.

BONSTED: What would you say was the peak year of the cooperative so far? In the thirties?

GRIFFIN: In the early thirties.

BONSTED: Do you remember what the volume was?

GRIFFIN: They now measure it altogether in pounds, but at that time we measured in gallons and would probably get thirty or forty thousand gallons every year, which gave us a good profit to the producer over what he could get from the individual dealers. So we regained confidence, and at one time had about the best credit of any cooperative in the market.

BONSTED: Why did it fall off again?

GRIFFIN: Largely through the loss of the sale to the tobacco companies. We originally sold in bulk to the Vermont producers and they'd put it in the blends, you know.

BONSTED: I see. How many members did you have when you began?

GRIFFIN: We had six: or seven hundred members. I doubt there are more than fifty now.

BONSTED: At first just from northern New York?

GRIFFIN: No, from every county in the state that produced. We had members from Cattaraugus and Allegany County, all the counties in the north, Green County and Cortland County, and Cattaraugus and all those **counties**.

BONSTED: And you issued stock and that's how you raised money to start out?

GRIFFIN: No, no stock, just each member paying in this little fee at first, and that was all spent in making the canvass, so nothing was left but the product. And after making all these purchases, we had to sell the product practically at the purchasers' price, so we had a sorry experience..

BONSTED: Do you still think the cooperative was a good idea?

GRIFFIN: I do. That's the only way that you can do it. Take the East, for instance. I remember in the fisheries along the Atlantic Coast -- Nova Scotia and up there. There was a priest, Father Thompkins, who saw those people just giving away their product to the Boston and New York markets -- their lobsters -- and he interceded and taught those people to sell their own product and make cooperatives, and the time came when rather than have the buyer buy at his own figures, they could fix the price of the stuff and make a profit. One time I met Father Thompkins, after reailing and knowing all about what he had done for those people. We were going up through Nova Scotia. He was then in a parish in the extreme east out on the coast of the Atlantic, and I wanted to go to see him so we went up north. There was a college up there at the north end of Nova Scotia and we left the coast because the road wasn't quite so good. We were driving through and saw a priest going down the walk and I stopped him to make some inquiry. I thought he'd tell me how the road was and the distance down to the parish where Father Thompkins was. He told

me Father Thoulpkins was in town that day at the college there, so I hunted him up and had a little session with him, which I appreciated very much.

BONSTED: Did this conversation influence you in forming the cooperative?

GRIFFIN: Not entirely, but it intensified my belief that it was the proper thing to do. And, consequently, we fixed our price rather than the independent buyer. I can remember when syrup was sold here for fifty cents a gallon in bulk in those containers. Now, the good quality brings \$5.00 and \$5.50 to the producer, which is the result of cooperative marketing.

BONSTED: The Griffin farm here has probably produced maple products for a hundred years, hasn't it? Did your father tap trees?

GRIFFIN: In the most primitive way. Down here below the house in the maple trees I can remember seeing the remains of old dugout troughs that were rotting away. My father had used them to make the first maple sugar that was made on the place. They had no augers, but they would make an ax mark in the tree and then drive in a sliver or something to conduct the flow of that sap. Of course, that was before my time, but I can remember seeing the remains of those old troughs.

BONSTED: Did they boil it down in the house or over an open fire?

GRIFFIN: At that time they'd use the old kettles. That was the first process of making maple syrup -- boiling down in those big kettles hung on a pole. Maybe that was boiled down in the house in their fireplace. But I've seen it all since then, and, of course, they're making improvements all the time.

BONSTED: Do you remember what your production was?

GRIFFIN: I've made as high as a thousand gallons of maple syrup in a **season.**

BONSTED: Did you make sugar besides?

GRIFFIN: No, not sugar. In the early days that was the only thing; there was no syrup put up for the market at all. It was all in sugar -- five and ten pound kegs. I can remember the first maple sugar my father ever sold to some traveling man for some grocery in the city of Rome. He got ten cents a pound for that sugar, which seemed like big money at that time.

1. Rome, New York.

BONSTED: Hard rrlOney. What were the prices that you used to get for syrup back in the nineties, lets say?

GRIFFJN: That was prior to the cooperative. Weld get 50 to 75 cents a gallon.

BONSTED: And that was pretty true for along period?

GRIFFJN: Yes, for quite a long period of time. The lowest price I remember was 50 cents a gallon in 1920 -- as late as that. In 122 we organized the cooperative and it went from that price (of course, the producer couldn't get the high price) to three or four dollars a gallon delivered in bulk to the plant at Gouverneur. Six times as much as a direct result of the cooperative.

BONSTED: I broke the tape there for a minute, Mr. Griffin, so we could rest up. Would you tell me again what you began to say about the cost and its meaning to a man today as compared to what he got for syrup years ago.

GRIFFJN: Some years ago the producer would get more profit from his product at a dollar a gallon than he would today at five dollars a gallon.

BONSTED: And yot:Lspoke of knowing what the rates per hour or per day's work were. years ago.

GRIFFJN: Years ago? A dollar and a half a day or 15 cents an hour for work in the woods, gathering sap, any work connected with the production of maple syrup.

BONSTED: What was the salary of that manager you had?

GRIFFJN: Three thousand dollars for the first manager. He lasted just one year.

BONSTED: And what was his idea of these small containers of syrup?

GRIFFJN: Individual service for the Pullman car service on the railroad and **for stea:rnship lines.**

BONSTED: A good idea but started a little too early?

GRIFFJN: Too early and started in high gear, which was a mistake.

BONSTED: And this was tragic because you lost the confidence of your members?

GRIFFJN: Oh yes, of the producers.. It couldn't be otherwise. And it took several years of strict economy to bring back in some measure that confidence, which we did.

BONSTED, Are there other cooperatives in the maple business now, or were there then?

GRIFFJN: No, this was the first and only real state cooperative.

BONSTED: There hasn't been one over in Vermont?

GRIFFJN: No other state cooperative. There are places like Lewis County where they have little private cooperatives, but this is the only state cooperative.

BONSTED: At the highest time your farm yielded about a thousand gallons. Did you produce that many gallons year after year? '

GRIFFJN: No. That particular year I'd had a greater number of trees tapped than I ordinarily had. We measured by buckets; sometimes we put out two buckets on a large tree. That year I had about four thousand buckets.

BONSTED: I was wondering how much manpower it took to process that much?

GRIFFJN: Three or four or five men. I used hired men.

BONSTED: Over the years your maple trees have been sold off for stumpage?

GRIFFJN: I did sell some stumpage, and with some I'd do the cutting and either sell them as stumpage or sell them on the skidways after the logs were cut and skidded in the woods.

BONSTED: To whom did you sell?

GRIFFJN: They were sold to the Emporium Lumber Company and to the last company that was doing business at Natural Bridge. They made shoe lasts, heels and things like that, also bowling pins.

BONSTED: And this, you feel, has been the pattern followed by other owners of timberland in this part of the country?

GRIFFJN: Yes.

BONSTED: Which means that the land is stocked now pretty much with mixed hardwoods and softwoods?

GRIFFIN, Small dimensions. And they're now using the hardwood for pulp so the little, small stump is marketable. Why, you've seen those little things, thousands and thousands of cords piled up at Deferiet. I've seen the same stuff coming down the streams in Canada -- that same little stuff -- so the sawing timber, the large stuff, is all gone. Of course, the pulp businesses where they have millions of acres, and in the South where they have their own plantations and grow that soft pine, in a very few years produce timber large enough for pulp, and by replanting they have a perpetual forest. But here we have given little thought to perpetuating timber of any kind.

BONSTED: Why do you feel that is the case? Because the men who owned the timberlands were essentially farmers rather than. . . ?

GRIFFIN, The desire of everybody for present-day needs, with little thought of the future.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, you were going to summarize the beginnings of timber harvesting in the Oswegatchie Valley. You spoke of the spruce having been cut off. Then there was the hemlock lumber era.

GRIFFIN, The bark for tanning purposes.

BONSTED, Yes, and the tannery was over at Fine?

GRIFFIN, In Fine village.

BONSTED: And that was a sole leather tannery for shoes, with hides brought in from South America -- not entirely but partly.

GRIFFIN, Well, I would say, as far as I know, practically all from South America. They would come in these halves; we'd call them sides. They were split through the back and, of course, they were cured to some extent so that they would keep, and were thoroughly dried. The tanned leather weighed a good deal more than the skins when they came here. The extract from the bark swelled up that leather and added a lot of weight to it so the finished product was a good deal heavier than the raw material.

BONSTED: They went out of Fine where -- south?

GRIFFIN: To De Kalb Junction for shipment. The company was Rice, Emory and Company with their home office in Boston.

BONSTED: Then shipment in and out was by water -- St. Lawrence River?

GRIFFJN: Oh no. It was by rail from De Kalb Junction. The last shipments went over the New York Central through Carthage and south, whereas before they had gone north of Fine through De Kalb Junction and by rail to their eventual destinations.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, what was the name of the tannery?

GRIFFJN: It was the Scriba Tannery.

BONSTED: That was the name of the township before?

GRIFFJN: Yes, the original. It afterwards took the name of Fine after Judge Fine, and the township comprised three townships all under the one administration.

BONSTED: When did the hemlock supply begin to run out?

GRIFFJN: I don't think there was any really worth-while merchantable hemlock bark after the beginning of the twentieth century in this country.

BONSTED: Well, then how long was there harvesting of the bark for the tannery's use? Over how long a period?

GRIFFJN: About twenty-eight years.

BONSTED: From about the early seventies to 1902, say at the most. Then it was the failing supply that caused the tannery to go out of business?

GRIFFJN: I would assume so because they were perfectly able to operate further. There was more bark probably in some sections here but the only means of delivery to the tannery was by horse power; therefore, they couldn't go beyond a certain radius from the tannery, which was about ten miles. A team would make one trip in a day.

BONSTED: Do you know whether, when the tannery closed down, the owners started a new one somewhere else?

GRIFFJN: I don't know. They may have somewhere else but not anywhere in this immediate vicinity.

BONSTED: This closedown must have thrown a number of men in the area out of work. How many employees did they have?

GRIFFJN: Probably a hundred men through the tannery and woods' work and all.

BONSTED: Probably about forty were in the tannery and the others in the woods. You told me that during the latter part of this period when the hemlock harvesting was pretty heavy the hemlock logs began to have a market as timber for lumbering.

GRIFFIN: In the early days the hemlock was ;felled and peeled for the first few years and a great percentage of it remained to decay and rot for the lack of a market, but a few years later, after the spruce and pine had gone, some of it was floated down the Oswegatchie River to the mill at Gouverneur.

BONSTED: This was in the nineties when the lumbering of the hardwoods was quite. ?

GRIFFIN: It began in the early nineties when the railroad was completed, and they depended on railroad shipping because there was no trucking at that time. That continued and continues still. There were some remote places in some of the virgin forests and they're taking some of the smaller logs that have grown since that time. You see the loads of hardwood going now, and they're small. Instead of the big logs of 18 and 20 inches and two feet in diameter, they're now 10, 12, 15 inches in diameter.

BONSTED: I think you remarked about seeing loads of birch going to Heywood Wakefield over in Gardner, Massachusetts, even today.

GRIFFIN: The last of my cutting' went to the Heywood people.

BONSTED: That was maple and birch, was it?

GRIFFIN: Principally maple.

BONSTED: It was in the nineties when you yourself went into business as a sawmill operator?

GRIFFIN: About '92.

BONSTED: Why did you decide to do this, Mr. Griffin?

GRIFFIN: There was plenty of timber available and transportation by the new railroad, and it occurred to me that there would be some chance to make some money in cutting the hardwoods and making it into lumber.

BONSTED: You had seen good money being made by the sawmill operators down the river?

GRIFFIN: Yes, but they were at that time all dealing with softwoods and, of course, were making it because they got it for nothing and they had the

cheapest transportation in the world, floating it down the river. I think we would have done better only for that slump in the markets in '92 and '93. We'd accept people that were rated high and instead of paying cash, they settled by notes -- three or four notes. -- and those notes were charged up to us at the bank. They would be bankable paper and that slump hurt like the devil, you know. Therefore, what we anticipated as profits were losses.

BONSTED: You put up some money and somebody else put up some money.

GRIFFIN: Yes, of course. Mr. Aldrich was a man that had a lot of money and he put up four times as much as I did so his losses were greater. But with all our indebtedness nobody lost any money through the North-side Lumber Company. That was the name of our company.

BONSTED: And it was right near here?

GRIFFIN: The losses were with the people that started it -- Mr. Aldrich and myself, but principally Mr. Aldrich. Yes, the mill was located just back of my farm here on a little brook, about a mile back there where we milled in the dam. It was a steam mill, you know.

BONSTED: You were in business only for a couple of years?

GRIFFIN: Late in '92 until early '95, two or three years,

BONSTED: How many employees did you have?

GRIFFIN: We employed about twenty men maybe around the mill, and when we were cutting the logs and hauling them there might have been forty men in the woods and around engaged in hauling the logs to mill and cutting them and skidding them and things. like that.

BONSTED: You told me their wages were pretty universally ?

GRIFFIN: Except for some of the more skilled labor in the mill, we paid \$1.35 a day. We didn't figure time by hours then; it was more by days -- which was practically ten hours. At \$1.35 per day it would be about fifteen cents an hour.

BONSTED: Yes, and six days a week. Then your supply of timber came from what sources.

GRIFFIN: A little from mine, but most of it from land owned by Weston, Dean and Aldrich.

BONSTED: I see. Then you gave cutting contracts?

GRIFFIN: No, it was done by day labor.

BONSTED: You were milling hardwoods entirely?

GRIFFIN: Hardwood. Spruce would be hardwood.

BONSTED: And Mr. Aldrich, your partner at this time, was milling hardwoods down at Gouverneur, too?

GRIFFIN: I don't think so. I think their mill operated altogether on softwoods, but they could float down the river.

BONSTED: You went from sawmilling back to farming?

GRIFFIN: Yes, back to farming.

BONSTED: And was that when you went into Guernsey raising?

GRIFFIN: Not just at that time but soon after I began in a modest way with the purebred Guernsey cattle.

BONSTED: How many acres did you have at the time?

GRIFFIN: I had my father's 320 acres and maybe 500 acres -- mostly forests, you know.

BONSTED: What pasture you did have had all been cleared during the previous fifty years or so, hadn't it?

GRIFFIN: Yes. My father did the bulk of the clearing. I cleared a little but my father did most of it. I give him credit for all the hard, hard work. I did plenty of hard work but not compared to my father.

BONSTED: When did you marry?

GRIFFIN: In 1897, to Mary Agnes Cummins of Carthage. We were the first to be married in the new St. Michael's Church built in Fine three years before.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, you were telling me about how crudely your father tapped trees when he first began in the middle of the last century.

GRIFFIN: Everybody knew from history or tradition that the Indians had discovered that there was sugar in the sap of the maple. Therefore, on that basis they tried to procure a little of it, as I told you, by hacking -- not with an auger -- but hacking with an ax into the tree diagonally and digging out these troughs. They'd take a piece of wood, straight grain, and split it in the center and they could dig out that for a receptacle for the sap. That I never saw done. It was before my day, but I remember seeing the remains of those old troughs turned up against the trees. Next was when they would bore in -- maybe they'd use a niche auger -- and whittle the spouts out of elder, you know, where they had a pith and they could take that pith out, and whittle off the point of the spout or spile, as they called it. They'd make them eight to ten inches long to where they could drive them into this, auger hole and the sap would come through where the pith was punched out. Then that end would be split in half and that would be the conductor of the sap to the bucket.

BONSTED: Then the crude troughs were succeeded by wooden buckets?

GRIFFIN: You find, particularly in Lewis County, that a great many wooden buckets are used today.

BONSTED: Is that so? Your father tapped about how many trees?

GRIFFIN: Usually when he got going about five hundred trees. The sap was boiled starting in one of those big caldron kettles hung on a pole over a post set in the ground -- a pole, with a chain on it. Of course, there was a big fire around the kettle and they could swing it over the fire. They all put the syrup down to sugar. It was a crude process and the sugar naturally was very dark. For years they made it for home consumption, or they would trade it with a merchant maybe for supplies, at a store -- in later years at the store in Fine, not so far away. I think I told you that the first sugar my father ever sold was hard cake sugar that he sold to **a traveling man, or salesman, for some mercantile concern in Rome.** I've forgotten just how many hundred pounds, but I think the price was ten cents a pound. That was the first money he ever made out of sugar.

BONSTED: Tapping maple trees was a wintertime occupation of yours almost all your life, is that right, down until a few years ago?

GRIFFIN: In the season, yes, when the sap began to flow -- sometimes early in March, and sometimes not until April.

BONSTED: Did the first World War have an influence on your timber values the way it did on farming, do you recall?

GRIFFIN: It might have been that the war had an effect, but I don't know what it was. About that time the timber values began to soar high, extremely high, and going higher all the time. But there's a scarcity now, you know.

BONSTED: I wondered if it had caused any revival of some of the woods' operations that had fallen off in this area?

GRIFFIN: No, the woods' operations were quite dependent on supply. As the supply decreased there were fewer woods' operations because there wasn't the timber available.

BONSTED: This decline had become quite prevalent by the first ten or fifteen years of the century, hadn't it?

GRIFFIN: Oh yes, gradual. But, of course, as prices soared the interest increased and, of course, the mighty dollar is what everybody is crazy about and, therefore, those people that were interested in lumbering sought forests where they felt they could operate profitably.

BONSTED: In your experience, Mr. Griffin, most of the farmers that you know have looked upon the woods as a supplementary income source, is that right, rather than something to which they gave a lot of time and attention?

GRIFFIN: Oh yes. This area right here was never good agricultural soil. It was stony and hard to work and not the best agricultural soil.

BONSTED: I know. In fact, some soil scientists feel that it has always been better adapted to growing trees than to growing annual crops. But you don't remember anyone having decided to concentrate on the timber growing rather than on annual crop farming?

GRIFFIN: No. Of course, as the forests were depleted from the early part of the present century, they have taken more or less to planting fir or the different varieties of spruce, or red pine, white pine, scotch pine. There are probably on this place now several thousand plants of scotch pine which have gradually been planted in the last five years. I got the first plants from the Ranger School nursery through Professor Dubuar as they had exhausted their planting territory up there. They planted to give Ranger School students the practice, but the land was all taken up. Therefore, they sought places nearby and almost all this planting here was done through their program except a little I did to start with. It didn't cost a cent.

BONSTED: When did you do some planting of trees?

GRIFFIN: Way back in '23 and '24 my brother John did a little plantmg, and they're pretty nice trees now in that section of the land up there -- and I did some.

BONSTED: Well, you've had some timber harvests off that forty-year-old planting, haven't you?

GRIFFIN! There could be now. Mr. Dubuar told me two or three years ago that up there they had gotten four to five thousand feet, log lllasure, off an acre in thinning that which had been planted thirty or forty years ago. It was largely red pine.

BONSTED: How large an area was planted, do you remember?

GRIFFIN: Up there? Oh, they had several thousand acres.

BONSTED: This was on your brother John's property?

GRIFFIN: No, up there. It was only 40 acres that he gave them.

BONSTED: These 40 acres are the gift that your brother made to the town of Fine. Have they kept it ever since as a town forest?

GRIFFIN: Well, there haven't been any more harvests. It wasn't a great success. The portion of this lot that faced the south where the timber had mostly been taken off hasn't turned out very well except in the exposed spots where the sunlight could get through -- *too* much underbrush there. That planting has got to have sunlight, you know.

BONSTED: It was cutover land?

GRIFFIN! Land that was burned over, and then the large merchantable timber was taken off. So the gift wasn't worth so much in dollar values, but he gave it anyway for that purpose and it was the first of its kind -- first lllunicipal towns.hip forest in the state of New York, I believe, although I don't know about other states.

BONSTED: Has the Ranger School had some practice use of it?

GRIFFIN: Where the Ranger School is situated -- the land they own -- was land that was owned by the Rich Lumber COlllpany. The Rich people held it until they had exhausted their supply of timber. Then an enterprising citizen there (Otto Hamele, dead now) interceded in the interests of education, or the Ranger School, and acquired the holdings of that company

for the Ranger School. I don't know what the consideration was, how much he paid for it or anything, but he got it and the Ranger School was started and was a great success. They gave a great reception for Mr. Dubuar before he left up there last year and he was considered one of the best instructors' in that line in the United States. That pleased me immensely.

BONSTED: I bet it did. Mr. Griffin, do you remember the time that the state passed the constitutional amendment to make the Adirondack Reservation?

GRIFFIN: I don't remember the date, but I do remember the occasion.

BONSTED: Was there a lot of controversy about that issue before it came up to vote?

GRIFFIN: I don't think there was at that time but there's been a lot of it since. They're trying to encroach on it now.

BONSTED: What do you think about it?

GRIFFIN: I was very much opposed to it. It's true, of course, that you could go in and thin and not injure the forest a bit, take down decayed timber, fallen timber, great big mature timber. But you let some of them get in there and you'll see; it would be the beginning of the end of our forests.

BONSTED: You feel then that having the cutting supervised by the Conservation Department would not be the answer?

GRIFFIN: I don't think it would because men, even sometimes pretty good men, can be influenced by the color of money.

BONSTED: We were reading here in the spring issue of NORTH COUNTRY LIFE an article about Adirondack Murray, and I remember that you said you saw him when you were just a lad of twelve or fourteen.

GRIFFIN; He and his party stayed on my father's land; that was on the next hundred acres where my son lives now. That was a pretty near new house then and a reasonably large house. There were several ladies in the party and I suppose they had the choice accommodations in the house. Of course, some of the guests slept in the barn, and the guides had to shift for themselves in the matter of shelter.

BONSTED: This was an overnight stay on the part of a party of rich people that Murray was taking into the woods?

GRIFFIN: There was this traveling man, Gharlie Holmes. He was a go-getter anyway, you know -- a man we knew well.

BONSTED: What relationship did he have to Murray's party?

GRIFFIN: He had organized it. It was probably Murray's last trip. Before, he had always taken parties in by way of the Raquette River. This time they had come in from the north, by railroad, then horses. At our place they were very near where they had to walk, you know, over the rough, up to the still water where they could take the boats, and near where their camps were built on Granberry Lake. I presume the guides had been instructed prior to their coming to get the camps ready. To show you how little valued this timber was -- many a spruce, magnificent spruce, was killed by peeling the bark just to make cover for those camps. They were open-front Adirondack lean-tos, with beds of boughs. Poles were put together for a frame and they'd peel that spruce as far up as they could cut it, great big nice strips for siding and roof and shelter, but nobody cared about the logs. It was non-resident land and there was no market for them. The peeled trees simply stood in the forest and died.

BONSTED: And so that's how you met Adirondack Murray?

GRIFFIN: A fine-looking man. When the party left in the morning, Murray rode a horse back and forth like a general marshalling his troops. There were about 30 guests and they had three saddle horses. My father made three trips with a horse-drawn sledge carrying their supplies. One of the guests was a handsome grass widow. When the party reached the boat landing, she and Murray hadn't arrived. I was delegated to go back for them. I was only a boy at the time. The group had planned to stay for three weeks or more, but it broke up in discord long before that. Maybe the reason was Murray and the widow -- he was quite a gay dog.

BONSTED: Mr. Griffin, I understand that the generations after you are having some connection with the things that we have been talking about. You have a son who is a forest ranger, is that right?

GRIFFIN: Yes, Frederick. He lives in the next house, on part of the old farm. He's been with the Conservation Department for about twenty years.

BONSTED: And he's greatly interested in trapping and wild life, you said.

GRIFFIN: He's perfectly satisfied with his job, and it is a good job. He has a lot of time off. Of course, when the weather is very dry and there are great fire hazards, then he has to stay home, you know, subject to the calls on the lookouts.

BONSTED: New York State has always had a pretty good record as r'egards forest fires, but perhaps you remember some years back when you were a young man. Were there forest fires then that were quite a danger?

GRIFFIN: Oh yes. That's why I've always been concerned over fire prevention --' g'etting people to be careful with fire in the woods, and with cigars and cigarets. Don't smoke, myself.