



Interview with Stanley W. (Pete) Orr

**Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator**

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Name of Interviewer: Flora Higgins

Premises of Interviewer: Mrs. Donowitz's home, Manalapan, NJ

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Ms. Higgins: Tell me Mr. Orr, what did your people do many years ago when they first came to Monmouth County?

Mr. Orr: They've always been farmers.

Ms. Higgins: Any particular kind of farming?

Mr. Orr: Originally they lived over on what is now McCaffery Road and back in there, they grew blackberries. Then, my grandfather came over here in 1903, and they grew potatoes.

Ms. Higgins: Oh, I have some experience with blackberry bushes myself. They are very labor intensive to pick, aren't they?

Mr. Orr: They're a hot itchy job.

Ms. Higgins: And you can't not wear long sleeves cause you'd get all scratched up. Where did you market them? Were they marketed locally?



Peter Orr's father and grandfather, Stanley and Tom, planting potatoes in 1939

Mr. Orr: I honestly don't know where they marketed them. There used to be a lot of buyers and dealers in the area for the potatoes. Most of the stuff that Grandpop and Pop grew went over to Reed and Perrine.

Ms. Higgins: When they went on that trip, did they take trucks?

Mr. Orr: Trucks. The major difference was they used to have potato graders right at the railroad siding, and they graded the potatoes as they loaded 'em.

Ms. Higgins: By size?

Mr. Orr: Yes. Picked the rotten ones out and sized 'em, and so forth.

Ms. Higgins: Was farming in New Jersey a very big industry?

Mr. Orr: Yes. Especially around here, when I was a kid, it was all potatoes. My wife's grandfather was Howard Jones. Down there they had a place called Jones Siding, and they named it Jones Siding because he loaded so many potatoes there.

Ms. Higgins: Remember, a few years ago, a big potato farm in Colts Neck, probably the last big potato farm, was sold to a developer.

Mr. Orr: Yes. The Flocks had lots of potatoes and then they had quite a large dairy. I don't know if there are any dairy farms left in the county. The last one was up in Upper Freehold.

Ms. Higgins: Upper Freehold is something like going back in time, isn't it? How did you meet your wife?

Mr. Orr: At the Grange.

Ms. Higgins: At the Grange. Which one? The Atlantic Grange?

Mr. Orr: Atlantic Grange.

Ms. Higgins: In Colts Neck. That is where the library is now. Oh, my goodness. She was from a farmer's family and you were farmers. So you went to meetings there?

Mr. Orr: Yes. The Grange wasn't limited to farmers. Her father was in the insurance business, and her grandfather was an insurance broker.

Ms. Higgins: So the Grange building was used for various meetings? That must have been a pretty good building.

Mr. Orr: Well, it was a good organization. Her grandfather built that area. He retired from Martins.

Ms. Higgins: In the 1940s?

Mr. Orr: No, later than that, probably in the late 1950s or 1960s.

Ms. Higgins: I know that building well. I used to be the librarian there. I always hoped it would be a historical library.

Mr. Orr: But I belonged to the Grange down here where the West Monmouth Church is.

Ms. Higgins: And is the Grange still active?

Mr. Orr: No, the Grange is gone away like a lot of things. No, I guess, there are still a few Grange members left in the extreme North and South Jersey.

Ms. Higgins: But was it an active part of your life when your family was farming?

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: What kind of things happened at the Grange?

Mr. Orr: It was mainly social, but also to lobby for farmers. In other words, they could lobby the lawmakers and so forth. Because you attend the Grange and the Farm Bureau, you know the farmers could have an influence. I think how like they had their first hearing on this new Route 33 and they talked about that for probably years and years and years. Their first hearing of it, too, was held at the Grange.

Ms. Higgins: Was it like a union for the farmers?

Mr. Orr: No, it was a family social organization.

Ms. Higgins: Would they get together and mention to the politicians and maybe run their own candidate?

Mr. Orr: Because of having a large membership, they were able to lobby political leaders and so forth.

Ms. Higgins: Can you tell me about an average day at a busy farm?

Mr. Orr: Well, we never had any animals. It was strictly crops and you would

basically depend on the weather in the springtime. What I recall my father and uncle doing is a lot of what you call custom work. That's where one local farmer works for another farmer and they would take their equipment around. More like the people do then, was the beginning of farming and they had a lot of tomato plants. Most farmers didn't because of it being a large investment, most farmers didn't go for it. They had a high speed planter (if there is such a thing) and a couple of tank trucks and pumps. They'd go around and pump, farm to farm, and plant the plants for them.

Ms. Higgins: Did they can tomatoes right there? Process them?

Mr. Orr: No, the tomatoes we planted, the majority of them went to the Campbell Soup Company. We had a few go to Stokes, which used to have a plant inside Vincentown. And there were some farmers around here that went to Stokley's in Trenton. And there was a canning house in... I don't remember that name...Foster's, I think it was. Custom work would be to accommodate the fact that each farmer didn't have to duplicate so much machinery. In other words, one farmer would have the combine, and in order to make it pay for him, along with doing his own, he would do other peoples' work, too.

Ms. Higgins: That sounds like a very profitable way to run it.

Mr. Orr: It was done so that each farmer didn't have to own a piece of equipment that you might only use for one day a year.

Ms. Higgins: I understand. Now, what would happen when everything would come in at once?

Mr. Orr: You worked around the clock.

Ms. Higgins: Did you get extra help in?

Mr. Orr: Yes. We had a crew of about between twenty and forty. These they called migrant helpers. They picked potatoes and tomatoes.

Ms. Higgins: Were they legal?

Mr. Orr: Yes. They worked the seasons. In other words, they worked picking string beans and I think around upstate Florida. Then come up and get another crop in the Carolinas. They would come up and pick the crop throughout Virginia. They would arrive here in, let's say, the first of August, and they would be here from the first of August until the first of November sometime, and then they would go back to Florida and start the loop over again. The apple farmers had apple pickers the same way and they used to call them crews. Like the crew we that had lived here, they also picked and handled Oliver Clayton's crop.



Stanley M. Orr (left) and Bill Clayton on tractors

Ms. Higgins: What did he grow?

Mr. Orr: Potatoes. And a lot of time they worked together with crews from Marlboro. Then that got to be, as things changed, the last couple of years we had tomatoes, we got what they call "day help." What would happen was there would be a bus to go down to a pick up point somewhere, then you pick them up. But, they became a problem because they put the day help with the help that we had for years and

they just spoiled it, because they wanted to be paid off everyday and it was just a big party for them.

Ms. Higgins: What did they do when they weren't picking?

Mr. Orr: Drinking.

Ms. Higgins: Oh. But I mean, in the winter?

Mr. Orr: They drank part of the pay they got.

Ms. Higgins: Farming is just so labor intensive, isn't it?

Mr. Orr: Oh, that is why you don't see any big extensive crops around here now. All your labor helpers moved to California and they had machine work. There are still a few Mexicans out there that are doing to work.

Ms. Higgins: Now all the laborers are "you pick."

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: You pick strawberries, you pick blueberries.

Mr. Orr: They had to start "you pick," because you couldn't get pickers.

Ms. Higgins: When did "you-pick" start?

Mr. Orr: Probably thirty years ago.

Ms. Higgins: And that was around when the people had left the farms?

Mr. Orr: It just evolved as there became more money in the economy. There were less people to do that type of work.

Ms. Higgins: Did you leave the farm due to the Depression, or did your family

farm here through the Depression?

Mr. Orr: Yes, yes definitely.

Ms. Higgins: That must have been hard.

Mr. Orr: Yes and no. I tell you it was hard, but the farmer was not hit as hard as the people who lost all their money. There were several banks and the associated businesses.

Ms. Higgins: Were they able to pay their mortgages and stay on the land?

Mr. Orr: Oh, yes. And at the time when I was a kid, they did a lot of what is called farming on shares. That's when a property owner would pay for the seeds and fertilizer in return for a percentage of their crop. Some of them are renting farms now. They didn't have the where-with-all to do that then. So they did what they called farming on shares and maybe you made about half of the crop. All the farmer did was put in the labor.

Ms. Higgins: And this was negotiable?

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: And that's another fairly sensible solution to a problem. It's not like tenant farming.

Mr. Orr: No. Potatoes are a very expensive crop. That's basically why there's not any grown around here now, because now the price is got to be out of this world. But very few people willing to do the work had the money to handle a crop. Dealers, they used to own a lot of ground, the same as when Frances and Saul (Donowitz) were in the chicken business. And the nearest big major feed companies owned a lot of chicken farms. The same idea.

Ms. Higgins: When the farmers would make political overtures, suggestions, and requests, what kind of things did they ask for?

Mr. Orr: They got a request that is still around today. The license plates on farm trucks, you see they say "farmer." They got the license plates for moving from farm to farm at a reduced rate. I think the Farm Bureau was a leader in getting the farm land assessment that we have today. Because without farmland assessment, there would be absolutely no farms left here.

Ms. Higgins: They are picking away at that legislation too, and I would hate to see that not be.

Mr. Orr: It is a double-edged sword because, today, only a few real farmers own

their own land. Most of the land is owned by investors, speculators, and so forth. They couldn't afford to own land without farmland assessment.

Ms. Higgins: What were some of the medical practices when you were growing up?

Mr. Orr: We went to the Doc Woodruff over at Englishtown.

Ms. Higgins: Woodruff?

Mr. Orr: Yes. The nearest hospital at that time was Neptune.

Ms. Higgins: Neptune. No Riverview. Of course, no CentraState.

Mr. Orr: No, Riverview started later but it started long before Freehold CentraState. And I personally worked the farmland where CentraState is. That was an old farm.

Ms. Higgins: Can you remember any fads or trends that came and went? When the War came, did that change a lot of the way people did things?

Mr. Orr: Basically, it made the automobile market good. The War really created a better market for the farmers because they had to feed their troops and there was a deferment policy for young guys on the farm. They were more valuable on the farm than in the military so there was a deferment. The potato was a mainstay.

Ms. Higgins: Can you describe any childhood games or things that you remember your parents doing or talking about or?

Mr. Orr: There's not much difference there, you know, except we used to play down in the yard. The biggest difference is at that time, the whole family did the business. In other words, you lived on the farm that was your topic of conversation.

Ms. Higgins: What would you think if farming was to go back the way it was? For example, sometimes you hear people talking about organic farming and not using tractors, is this possible?

Mr. Orr: I've never done that, but it's possible. Farmers would love organic farming, as they wouldn't have to buy those expensive chemicals, but you always need a chemical because potatoes are not normal to this area. So, that is why you get so many problems. It is not natural to grow potatoes like they are. So you have to treat the ground in order to do it.

Ms. Higgins: My farmer friends say farming starts in the dirt.

Mr. Orr: Because for any intense farming like potatoes and your orchards, and so on, and any of your crops, tomatoes, corn, and like that, you have to take care of your land or you're not going to have next year to work with.

Ms. Higgins: Did you rotate crops?

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: Mr. Orr do you think people were happier when the days were so much quieter and we didn't have all this rushing around in cars and things like that?

Mr. Orr: I don't think they're any happier or less happy.

Ms. Higgins: So many people complain to me that they are so rushed today.

Mr. Orr: People got to do what they have to do with the time they have to do them. I never recall not being rushed because you had to rush to get your work done.

Ms. Higgins: Even in the winter?

Mr. Orr: No, but in the winter, even then most people would find other things to do. Many farmers would work for a couple or three or four months as carpenters. That's time my uncle got started in the car business. He worked with a mechanic.

Ms. Higgins: Oh, and then he left farming and was a full-time car dealer?

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: Did your people come from Ireland or somewhere where they liked to grow potatoes, and they knew potatoes?

Mr. Orr: No, just because it was the most profitable crop around here at the time. One Grandpop came from Scotland. One Grandmomma came from Ireland, and I think, I don't know where all of them came from, other than we just a mishmash.

Ms. Higgins: Like most Americans, myself included. Is there any story or background about Monmouth County that you would like to share to people who will be listening to this or reading this interview in the middle of the 21st Century? If you were to say why Monmouth County is special, what would you say?

Mr. Orr: Monmouth County used to be the leading garden county in the nation. I think it was even more than Lancaster County in Pennsylvania. But ground is just plain too valuable to farm, and that is why it is somewhat more valuable to develop it than farm it.

Ms. Higgins: With the proximity to the cities, the people would just rather move here.

Mr. Orr: People had the money and they wanted to get out of the cities and live in the suburban area, and land is just plain too valuable to farm. And the pressure to get the farmers out of there is intense. It's kind of an economical thing.

Ms. Higgins: What about the horse farms? They seemed to come out a little better.

Mr. Orr: Because a lot of it is recreational and because people are willing to spend money that they earn somewhere else. They don't have to make a living off their horses. I'm not saying all of them, but a lot of them.

Ms. Higgins: What do you think are the personal strengths that your family had that enabled them to keep farming and working so hard like that?

Mr. Orr: They didn't know what else to do.

Ms. Higgins: They were farmers, Monmouth County farmers. We are the Garden State. Was Monmouth the most intensely farmed county in the Garden State?

Mr. Orr: At one time. There's much more farming done now down in extreme south Jersey.

Ms. Higgins: Burlington, Camden?

Mr. Orr: Oh, way on down.

Ms. Higgins: Atlantic?

Mr. Orr: Salem County too. Most of the farmers who I knew from around here who wanted to remain in farming have gone to either Salem County or Delaware; lots of them have gone to Chester County in Maryland and they just keep one step ahead of the developers.

Ms. Higgins: When you had the potato crop, did you use a lot of the potatoes yourself, or did you never want to see a potato by the time you got it in?

Mr. Orr: No, it really wasn't too much. I recall at the end of the time, there being a bunch of potato harvesters, where they didn't pick by hand, you know where they handled them by bulk with the Harvester, instead of digging them and picking them up. And really, other than being a long dusty day, it wasn't that bad.

Ms. Higgins: And you supported yourself and your family, raised children and supported yourselves doing nothing but potato farming until when?

Mr. Orr: Well, I left farm before I got married, because you couldn't make a living. It is a funny thing.

Ms. Higgins: Even after the War when the economy was still expanding, I guess it was expanding into houses then.

Mr. Orr: The farmers faced a different economy. Their economy was probably better during the War than right after it. The only thing about it was you couldn't buy the equipment during the War and so they purchased a lot of equipment right after the War in the late 40s and early 50s.

Ms. Higgins: They probably got into debt, too, what with the tractors and combines and harvesters.

Mr. Orr: Yes. And if the average farmer had one good year out of seven or eight, he was doing pretty good.

Ms. Higgins: Really! Of course, you couldn't do much about the weather any more than we can now.

Mr. Orr: No. Funny thing, because when the weather's good, the price is bad, and when the price is good, the weather's bad. That's just the way it is.

Ms. Higgins: When you were growing up, who were the heroes for the people in Monmouth County?

Mr. Orr: I can't think of anyone special.

Ms. Higgins: Did you ever get to the seashore?

Mr. Orr: Once in awhile, but even when I was a kid, it was too crowded for me.

Ms. Higgins: Where did you go?

Mr. Orr: Manasquan.

Ms. Higgins: And Manasquan was too crowded for you?

Mr. Orr: Yes.

Ms. Higgins: What did you end up doing when you left the farm?

Mr. Orr: Working on trucks. I became a truck mechanic.

Ms. Higgins: So, you became a mechanic also. I guess experience working with tractors and all of that farm machinery helped you.

Mr. Orr: You know, farming was a business for most people. And we tried to make a buck, same as any other business

Ms. Higgins: Where are potatoes grown now? I hear Long Island doesn't do much with the potato anymore, either.

Mr. Orr: They still grow a lot out West, in Idaho and Maine. They grow some up in Maine and northern parts. 'Cause the potato's natural environment is in the high grounds.

Ms. Higgins: I never would have known that. All the potato farmland you usually see is flat, flat, flat.

Mr. Orr: Yes. You usually got a good crop here, but the normal environment, they just grow at a higher elevation. We used to get seed potatoes from Maine and New England, and Prince Edward Island, and all up in that area. There were people who had made a living bringing them down on trucks.

Ms. Higgins: It must have been pretty expensive too, that's a lot of gas.

Mr. Orr: You had to get the proper seed potato. They had to grow in the cold weather. Cool weather.

Ms. Higgins: That is certainly not Monmouth County. Is there anything that you would like to say to the people of the future about the past in Monmouth County?

Mr. Orr: You just have to go with the flow. My father's name was Stanley Orr and every body call him Plugger and I was Pete. A lot of people that don't know me as anything but Pete.

Ms. Higgins: Thanks very much, Mr. Orr.