



Orleans County Historical Association

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1893-1991



Orleans County Historical Association

INTERVIEW

Mr. H. Justin Roberts
Maple Ridge Road
Medina, New York



Interviewed by
Arden R. McAllister
March 2, 1978

R H. Justin Roberts (born 1893)
Mc Arden R. McAllister, Orleans County Historian



Orleans County Historical Association

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to collect information about the historical development of Orleans County by means of tape-recorded conversations with people whose experiences reflect the county's growth.

These tapes and transcriptions will be preserved as educational resources and possible publication (all or in part).

I hereby release this tape and transcription to the Orleans County Historical Association.

W. Justin Roberts

Signed

3/2/78

Date

Understood and agreed to:

Arden R McAllister

INTERVIEWER

3/2/78

Date

R I was born in the southern part of the town of Shelby; lived there the first 35 years of my life and then we moved out here on the Maple Ridge Road where we live presently on a 166 acre farm which is fruit, vegetable crops and grain.

Mc What year were you born?

R December 27, 1893. My father was Bert (Albert) Charles. He always called himself "B. C. Roberts". He not only farmed it but thru the winter time he was a paper-hanger. My mother was a Watson. She was a schoolteacher in her early days. She taught school in East Shelby for two dollars a week, and in the winter time she'd have students up as high as 25 years of age. She walked two miles morning and night to and from school.

Mc Did she have to make the fire in the school too?

R No, I don't think so. In going back to my forebearers, they came to this country from Wales; three brothers, young fellows together, came into New England. Two of them disappeared from view and we take it for granted that they went west and probably strung Roberts all down across the country. One of them stayed in New England and volunteered five different times in the Army in the Revolution. He served under George Washington. In fact he was a great wrestler and he and another wrestler put on a show for George Washington one night! He married, and one of his sons (who was my great-grandfather) came into the town of Darian; farmed there for several years. Selling out there, he came into the town of Shelby, crossing what later became known as the "Oak Openings" (near Oakfield). Apparently, on coming from Darian into Shelby he had to swing around the neighborhood of Oakfield because there was no bridge across the creek at that time and he crossed what was known as the Oak Openings. He didn't settle there because he didn't think the land would be good because of the scarcity of trees. So he passed up good land and come down into Shelby and carved out his home and farm from the forest. One winter when there was a shortage of feed, he'd go thru the forest cutting down Elm trees and the cattle would browse on the brush. When he came down into Shelby, he brought all of his worldly goods on a wagon with a team of horses, several children and a couple of cows leading behind. His name was Ziba Roberts, Senior. He had five sons and two daughters.

Besides that there were two that died in infancy. He settled what later became known as the Roberts' Homestead, which burned just recently. Ziba Junior was the youngest one in the family and served in the Civil War. He was taken prisoner two different times and was held in the infamous camps. One of them was Andersonville, and the other one was on a small island in the James River, near Richmond, Virginia. Following the War, he built the large home. Coming down to my own family: my daughter is the oldest one. She's now 50 years of age and lives in Penfield and she is interested in politics and a member on the Penfield Town Board. Her husband is the project engineer at Eastman Kodak; has an excellent job. They have four boys; three of them are presently in college. One will graduate in the spring and the youngest one will go to college next fall. Her name is Anna and she married John Bundschuh. Orren was the next in the family. He also is interested in politics; served on the Orleans County Board of Supervisors six years. He has three daughters and one son. One daughter was graduated from Morrisville; one daughter is in college presently and the other daughter is still in high school, and the youngest one is in the fourth grade. The younger son, Lee, has three daughters and a son, all in Medina school. Two boys have formed a legal partnership. They own a Farm in the neighborhood of 1,200 acres. They run the Robert's Brothers Market on the Maple Ridge Road. Orren's wife is a graduate nurse. Lee's wife was a graduate of Geneseo State Teacher's College. My grandfather's name was Horace. Ziba Roberts Senior came into the town of Shelby in 1824. My wife was Lorraine Morse. Her home was in West Shelby and her people came into the town of Shelby in 1822. Her great grandfather organized and founded the Christian Church in West Shelby, which still stands there but at present is a grocery store. I think that takes care of the family!

Mc Is that the place where Mr. Caleb had his store?

R Yes.

Mc Then, a little bit about your schooling?

R My schooling? That's not good! (laughter). I went to what was called the White Pigeon School (District #5). The school was situated in the corner of our farm and I went there until I got

my 8th grade certificate.

Mc What road was that on?

R East Shelby Road. Presently a lot of people call it the Knowlesville Road. Getting my 8th grade certificate, I had to go into Medina to take the examinations. They were held in the old Academy building that stands where the present High School does... There was a grand teacher in there: a Miss Cora Newnham, that was very nice to me. I went down there, a green kid from the country and I didn't know where to go or what to do. Somebody said I had to go up a flight of stairs. I got up there and hesitated and she come over and very kindly pointed out a seat for me, brought me the papers. I'll never forget her. Following that, I went to High School for ten weeks. I started in January and one subject that I liked, for some reason or other, they took away from me. So, after ten weeks, the sun began to shine on the farm and I had to get back to work. That ended what you might call my education; but, the next year I went to Lockport to a Bettinger Business Institute where I took a course in accounting and book-keeping. I had seven subjects. It was suppose to be a six months course. I could have finished it in four months but at the end of three months I had to go back to the farm. My father wasn't very well. So I went back the second winter, completed the course in two months, and it's proved to be a very good bit of education for me. Otherwise I'm self-educated.

Mc Where was your father's farm located?

R Two miles south of East Shelby. It was south of the old Robert's homestead. There were three Robert's farms: The Robert's Homestead, three farms south of that was my grandfather's which my father took over, and three farms south of that was a brother of my grandfathers and he had a farm there.

Mc Your father's name was Bert? And his father was Horace? How was Horace related to Ziba Junior?

R Those three Roberts that I mentioned were brothers. Horace Roberts was my grandfather. In fact I carry the name: Horace Justin.

Mc What year did you come to this farm?

R My father passed away when he was 52 years of age and it wasn't

too good a farm. I was married in 1922 and about that time I went to Oakfield and worked in a gypsum plant over there for about five years. During that time my wife was teaching school. She taught school in Millville and in the White Pigeon, our home district. Following that we came down here and bought this farm on Maple Ridge Road. That was in 1931. Five years ago last Novemebr we were married fifty years and this winter our family took us out to dinner at the Airport Restaurant in Rochester to celebrate our 55th wedding anniversary!

Mc When you came to this farm there probably weren't so many buildings around as there are now?

R Oh no. No, there were only two houses between here and West Ave. No business at all. Funk's gas station was the first industrial building on this road. That was on the corner of West Avenue and the Maple Ridge Road. It's a Sunoco gas station now.

Mc The road probably was paved by 1931?

R This was, but going back, the road south of Medina, route 63 thru the swamp, the first road was what they called the "corduroy road". All thru the swamp the logs were cut out of the swamp and placed side by side; endwise across the road all the way thru there, with some dirt throwed on top. So it was rather a bumpy road but there were no automobiles in those times, so we got by. I remember two toll gates on that road. Had to stop the horse and team and pay toll. One was at the point of West Avenue and South Main Street, and the other was about three miles farther south.

Mc That would be south of Shelby Center. Do you remember how much the toll was, to go across?

R I don't remember just the exact amount. I do remember as a small boy, riding with my aunt and uncle, between them on a spring seat of a lumber wagon. My aunt knew the lady that was operating the toll gate, so they stopped and passed the time of day before we moved on into Medina.

Mc Do you remember what year the shopping Plaza moved onto the section of what was your land; that part of it?

R Yes. We sold 56 and a fraction acres where the Plaza now stands and also the Lakewood Village Mobile Home Park came off that land.

Mc That was about 1970 ?

R Approximately about that time. We owned the land on the south

side of the road, also where the Heinz pea-vinery site was. We always owned the land. Heinz leased the land, built the shed with a concrete floor. When they left, they left the shed also and that has been converted into the Robert Bros. Farm Market.

Mc Your speciality has always been fruit?

R That was number one! When we came here there was several acres of pears as well as apples. But for several years now there hasn't been an original fruit tree left. So it's been all fruit that I have planted and my sons carrying on, still planting.

Mc What was the market for your fruit?

R Up until five years ago about 2/3 went for processing and 1/3 for fresh fruit. Of course the porportion of fresh fruit is getting larger every year because of the Market (Roberts Bros. Market). The two sons in partnership have a large egg producing facility. They keep about 24,000 laying hens and they raise 12,000 pullets two or three times a year. Of course they are increasing the fruit orchards. Also they grow a great deal of grain. This past year they had 100 acres of wheat, 650 acres of corn which was all harvested in good shape.

Mc In spite of the wet weather last fall?

R It was a job but they did it!. It takes 25,000 bushel of corn to feed their poultry. The rest they sell, cash market.

Mc They feed poultry with assembly-line methods don't they; with conveyor belts?

R Yes, the water and the feed are all automatic.

Mc You've seen some changes in chicken houses haven't you!?

R Oh yes. (laughs). We used to think we had a lot of laying hens when we had 250, which was a large farm flock at that time.

Mc I suppose you've seen a lot of changes in methods of fruit farming; the machinery and so forth?

R Well, I've lived in a marvelous time. When I look back and see the new things, the developments in my lifetime; for example take hydrolic power which has been largely brought forth in my time. The automobile was certainly in infancy at the time I was born. My days of farming was with animal power. I was the first man in the town of Shelby to go 100% mechanical farming; possibly the first in Orleans County! One of the great things in my time has been the radio and the t.v. Especially the colored television which is so far beyone my understanding, it isn't funny!

- Mc Do you remember what you used to do evenings before radio and t.v.?
- R Oh yes. We read more and we had more neighborhood gatherings where 3-4-5-6 couple would get together and play cards, eat apples. We had good times.
- Mc At one time there was a railroad that, as I recall it, came from Medina and cut across your farm.
- R The trolley line?
- Mc Was it the trolley line that went across your land?
- R Oh, I know what you mean. The old Darian and Medina railroad! It used to carry salt from the salt works north of Medina, up south into Akron. It was a one-horse railroad. The rails were wood and the cars that carried the salt, the wheels were on an axel so that the wheels could oscillate back and forth on the axel to follow the crooks in the rails. Those tracks were laid on ties that were just round pieces of timber leveled up with dirt so that the horses could travel over them easily. We still don't know where that railroad crossed the canal. I had a photostat copy of one of the stock certificates that was issued before that was built. I gave it to my son Orren. I don't remember the dates.
- Mc Can you still see where the line went across part of your farm?
- R Mr. Cary Lattin (former Orleans County Historian) came up here several years ago and tried to get some pictures of it. At that time we could still distinguish it, but presently I doubt very much, altho it is possible, that we could see some of the grade. There are trees that are now growing on the right-of-way, that are 18 inches in diameter.
- I might go back a little ways; it might be of historical interest some day, some of the things that I did in my lifetime; starting as a farmer and as a laborer, came down here and started new. Hadn't been here very long before I was asked to run for the office of Supervisor in the town of Shelby, which I did, and won! That job, I held for 22 years. Before that I was a trustee of the school district for two years. I became a member of East Shelby Methodist church when I was 14. Some little time after that, I was Superintendent of the Sunday School for two years. For 16 years I was Director of the Orleans County Farmer's Mutual Insurance Company for the town of Shelby; I was chairman of the committee that organized the 4-H Clubs in Orleans County. One time member and President of the Medina Rotary Club. For a great many

years a member of the Orleans County Extension Service. I was a member of the East Shelby Grange for 49 years; a Charter member. It disbanded in my 49th year. The Grange played a big part in my earlier life. Those are some of the highlights in my life.

Mc Are there any particular achievements that you recall while serving on the Board of Supervisors, like the Infirmary? Were you still a member of the Board when the present County Infirmary was built?

R Yes I was. My name is on the plaque at the entrance to the Infirmary.

Mc Were you off the Board by the time they built the county jail?

R Oh yes. My son Orren was on the Board for six years and the jail was built during that time. About that time the county put a sales tax on and the county kept all of that tax money and had the new jail paid for in a very short time. So, they avoided all those interests payments.

Mc You were a Republican in your politics?

R Yes. A little bit independent. There have been 2-3 times when I've voted for the other side if I thought he was the better man.

Mc You mentioned that you were a member of the East Shelby Methodist. Sometime you must have changed because at present you are a member of the Medina Presbyterian church.

R Yes, we came down here. It is a long ways up to East Shelby church. For several years we didn't attend church services but when our daughter Anna was a little girl, the Woodard twins and the O'Donnel twins asked her to go to Sunday School with them and they were Presbyterian. Of course, we saw to it that she went. When Orren came along and he went, they both became members of the church. Then Lee, getting thru Sunday School and time for him to join the church, he wasn't so sure. So, Lorraine and I got together and we decided we'd make it a family affair. We took Lee and we transferred from East Shelby. Mr. Clifford Wise asked me once to come up with something with my religious experiences. Perhaps this would be a good time to say something like that? When I was four years old, my mother had taken me to Rochester to visit her sister and her husband; and one night, put me to bed. There was a flickering light, my mother said, where she could see into the stairway. There was a street-lamp right across from the house, so she didn't think much about it. But it persisted and she finally got curious and started up the stairs. She found

the room in flames! The bed that I laid on was burning on both sides, and across the foot! She picked me out from between the flames and got me downstairs. My cousin ran and turned in the fire alarm. The family went up the stairs and threwed the bedding out the window and the fire was out by the time the firemen got there. I always wondered if there wasn't a Divine Presence that helped me out of that! Later on when I was a teenager, the Brown home in East Shelby caught fire. Mr. Jenny and I took a heavy fire-extinguisher from Mr. Jenny's store between us and ran for the fire; but it was too far gone. The stove had already gone thru the floor. So I went into the front of the house and tried to get out some furniture. I got the big over-stuffed chair out but the davenport wouldn't go thru the window. I got it stuck; couldn't get it out or get it in. Just then the fire come in over the door, caught the ceiling paper and it came right down! The whole ceiling came right down over me. I took my hands and broke it away from my head. It just happened it was one of those old houses that was built wrong end to. I made a rush for a door and it led into a so-called parlor-bedroom. There I was able to break a window out and get outside. My hair and the fuzz on my cap were all singed. There again, was there a Divine Presence that wanted to keep me around for awhile longer? My third and last time: up in Dr. Roach's camp, way up in Canada; I went up there with him a great many times. This once was late in the fall and it was cold. He sent me on ahead with a small boat; quite windy and quite rough but I got towards camp okay and got the fire started. When the rest of 'em came, I went out to get a pail of water... where the water went down, real fast! I was still cold, all my clothes on. I reached over and pulled up the brimming pail of water, and about the same time a gust of wind hit me from behind. I went head-first into the lake. In the momentum of the wind and the momentum of the fall, I was going towards deep water pretty fast!. It was only seconds when my clothes filled with water, and down I went! I was headed away from shore and I'll never know definitely how I got turned around and crawled out on the bottom of that lake and got outside! There again, was there a Divine Presence that got me turned around in the right direction?

Mc Well! Those were some experiences, close calls!

R I've served on the Board of Trustees in the Medina Presbyterian church for nine years. Three of those years was before I became a member. Back in those times it was a requirement of a Presbyterian church to have one member of the Board of Trustees from outside of the congregation, which has later been changed.

Mc They don't requite that anymore?

R No, that's all been changed. I served nine years. Now two 3 year terms is the limit that anyone can serve.

I've got a powder-horn here that I'm showing you Arden. They burnt the lettering right into the horn. (The powder-horn is about 7" in length & has a butterfly painted on it). A cousin up in North Michigan handed the powder-horn to me. She said, "You'd be more interested in that than my boys will."... That's William Wolcott, 1825. He was the brother of my great grandmother. One of my proud possessions. (Mr. Roberts displays several artifacts).

(End of side one of tape)

Mc Mr. Roberts, let's go back to some of your family history.

R Our daughter Anna is a graduate of the University of Rochester, and her husband, John Bundschuh, is a graduate of the Renssellaer Polytechnic Institute. Orren and Lee each went to Cornell for a two year agricultural course. Lee's son presently is in Cornell taking a four year course. Orren's wife, Joan, had a four year nursing course in the Rochester General Hospital. Lee's wife, Ginny, had a four year teaching course in Geneseo State Teacher College. Orren's oldest daughter, Susan, had a two year course in Morrisville. Orren's daughter Sharon, is in Oswego College and will graduate this June. That takes care of the education part of it.

Mc That represents a lot of hours of study and a little money!

Could we go back to the farming again? How did you do your threshing in those early times?

R Well we always kept from 3-5 horses. All the farm work was done with horses. I've walked behind a plow for a good many miles. Also walked between a harrow or a roller on soft ground; get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and do the chores, get the horses ready and be in the fields at seven; have supper around six and do chores an hour or two after supper. Put in long hours of hard work! A short time before we came down here, we got a tractor to do some of the work. When we came down on this farm, we dropped

back to two horses and used more tractors and more farm power and eventually got about 100 percent mechanical power. One interesting thing that happened: a horse dealer in Medina kept coming up here, trying to sell me more horses. I wouldn't buy. The man that worked for us, the horse dealer met him on the street in Medina one day and he said, "How in the world is Roberts going to get along up there farming without some good horses?" The man told him, "Mister, the only time we miss the horses is at chore time!"

Mc Did you have some help from neighbors, some times? Or did you have them in for dinner, or...?

R Oh yes. We had as many as 5 people working here on this farm some of the time. The first 3-4 years we boarded a man here full time; board and meals. Then it tapered off and he would just get breakfast and dinner here. He'd go home for supper, and finally that all ended. The help all took care of themselves. Pretty hard times in the early '30s. Had two men from Medina come up here and made me a proposition that they would clean up a hedgerow across the farm and they'd be glad to do it for 15¢ an hour each. I told them to go ahead. A hedgerow averaged 22 feet wide, so they had an all winter's job. I worked one time for awhile in the wintertime for 25¢ an hour; walked a mile and a half to work and back.

Mc Did the Depression have any real effect on your farming? Was it tougher, or what?

R Well, it was mostly depression on a poor farm.

Mc Even in the '20s I guess farming wasn't all that prosperous was it?

R No; I milked 10-12 cows by hand, twice a day. Income from milk kept us in groceries. After we were married, my wife was teaching school and brought in a pretty good income. We had a car at that time and she'd drive 5 miles to school and back.

Mc Speaking of cars, do you have any recollection of the first time you saw an automobile?

R Yes; the first time I saw an automobile was at the Albion Fair. On Saturday morning they always put on a good parade: livestock, horses and whatever they could get to lead around the track, and a few instruments to play some marches. I was probably in the neighborhood of 14 years old and they brought an automobile onto the ground. The first one I ever saw and it was to go around,

following the parade. Which it did, until it got about half-way around. It stalled and sat there the rest of the day. They couldn't get it started! (laughs). My first ride was with Dr. Neal who bought an automobile that was nothing more than a gasoline engine set on a frame and rigged up with a steering wheel. I rode two miles with him and I thought that was really something! My father bought his first automobile in 1915, a 1914 model, called it a demonstrator. That was the first year of my driving a car.

Mc Did you have any trouble with it?

R Oh yes. We had tire trouble!! (laughs). It had quite a large storage battery. The car didn't have a self-starter; all it furnished was the lights. When the battery went bad, I had to go to Buffalo to get one and it cost \$40.00! That was a lot of money in those days. Couldn't get one in Medina. A Maxwell Touring car.

Mc Do you remember what that first car at the Fair was?

R No, I don't remember.

Mc It probably didn't have any top on it, did it?

R No it didn't. It was open, with one seat.

Mc Do you think it had a steering wheel or one of those, what would you call it, with a bar?

R That I couldn't say. I don't remember. The crowds were so thick around it, you had difficulty to get up near it.

Mc I suppose the Fair was quite a big event every year?

R Oh yes! You bet! From our place we had to drive twenty miles with the horse to get there, but I don't think we ever missed. We'd take along a little bag of oats to feed the horse at noon, and carry our own lunch.

Mc About how long would it take you to get to Albion?

R I don't remember. I do remember going home in the evening on all dirt roads. So much travel would kick up the dust and you could see it like fog across the fields, on a still evening.

Mc Did World War I have any impact on your family in any way?

R No. I was exempted because of farm work. My father was not well. He passed away when he was 52. I had the full responsibility of the farm when I was 16.

Mc That's quite a responsibility for a kid!

R I think kids matured earlier in those days.

Mc Do you have any special memory about Pearl Harbor day?

R Well, I can go back still farther to when President William McKinley was killed at the Pan American Building (in Buffalo). Father and I was fixing a fence along the schoolyard; the school was in the corner of the farm. A neighbor with a horse and buggy drove up and said that President McKinley was assassinated the day before. We had no free mail delivery. We had to go two miles to get our mail. That would be in East Shelby. In those days, East Shelby, Millville, Knowlesville and all those little places had their own postmark. In the wintertime neighbors along our road used to take turns going down to East Shelby and getting the mail. They would bring the mail up and leave it at each house along. Mail was brought up from Knowlesville by horse and wagon. It would be delivered at the Knowlesville depot.

Mc I think that's all the questions that I have. Is there anything you would like to add?

R Well, I might mention something about the farm cooperatives that have been such a big help to agriculture. I was on the Knowlesville GLF Store Committee for several years. I was also on the GLF Marketing Committee and in Canandaigua for several years. But that has grown and grown and grown. I can't even name the entire territory that they cover now.... I've been a member of Medina Lodge Masons for 52 years. Also a member of the Royal Arch Masons and Council. I never went beyond the local lodges.

* * * * *

The above interview was transcribed, edited and typed by Helen M. McAllister of Medina, New York.