

Freedom's Way National Heritage Area & Nashua River Watershed Association
"Farms, Fields, and Forests: Stories from the Land in the Nashua River Watershed"
Oral History Project
Interviewer: Al Futterman, NRWA Land Programs Director

An Interview with John Mickola of Ashby, MA in August, 2014

Interviewer: This is fields, farms and forests, take one. We're meeting in this incredible property. Can you tell me, in a few words, what you have here?

00:00:15.9

John Mickola: Right now, the property consists of 53.2 acres. **We've just gone through the process of having our land, what's called a permanent lien put on it, restriction, conservation restriction. So, it will stay in perpetuity just as it is.**

00:00:41.3 And in that process, we had land surveyed, had a modern survey, and it came out to be the 53.2 acres.

Interviewer: Had you thought it was something else?

00:00:51.9

John Mickola: I have the original deed that my grandfather, when my grandfather bought the place in 1907, and it was—

Interviewer: 107 years ago?

John Mickola: Yeah. And it was listed as 67.5 acres. So, between the time of the purchase and, now—there was a piece of land across the street that, got taken off because my sister and her husband built a house there. But it was about three, is about three acres. So, the earth shrank in, in the time that we, did that.

00:01:35.0 Either that or the surveyors back then were more optimistic. I'm not sure exactly what. I don't think any other property changed hands. The stonewalls are pretty definite and, every, it's really bounded by stone walls on all sides.

Interviewer: So, we are on a century farm. Can you tell me how it came about, and, the story of how you came to live here?

00:01:59.7

John Mickola: Well, the story that I've been told is that I'm Finnish heritage. My grandfather was born in Finland and in the town of Kaustinen. And he came over to work in the iron mines in Minnesota.

And, then, as will happen, the Finns all congregated together. They found their own tribe, so to speak, and were working there.

00:02:34.2 And then there was a movement to the East Coast, to Fitchburg, Gardner, Hubbardston as there was a great Finnish tradition here in this area. They all migrated this way. My grandfather was living in New Ipswich at the time, as I understand it, which is just over the line. His aunt and her husband bought a little house on Jones Hill Road, on the bottom of Jones Hill Road, and, he (my grandfather) had the desire to be near his aunt.

00:03:14.9 So, he was looking for land, and this farm was up for sale. He bought it for \$1,300 in 1907. **It wasn't unusual, in the sense that every farm on this hill eventually became owned by a Finnish family.**

00:03:38.4 It was a Finnish enclave. When I was a kid growing up, all the neighbors were of Finnish heritage.

Interviewer: That explains the sauna.

00:03:49.3

John Mickola: Yeah, oh, yeah. Every farm had a sauna, except that ours did not, because my grandmother was epileptic. My grandfather was afraid that she would hurt herself in the sauna, because she would have petite mal seizures. And, in fact, a distant cousin, was brought in. She had no visible means of support or place to go, my grandfather offered her a place here at our house to be a caretaker/companion for my grandmother.

00:04:30.9 So, just in case—cooking, for example, she could be stirring water on the stove, and then have one of these seizures. As long as someone was here to be able to make sure... It was a very communal family, for sure, and group.

00:04:50.3 **Everybody helped each other around the neighborhood, so that when it came time for haying, the farmers would move from one farm to the other and all help each other get their haying in.**

Interviewer: You mentioned that he bought this farm. So, do you know much about what it was before your grandfather got here?

00:05:13.1

John Mickola: Well, it turns out that—I belonged to the Grange for many years, you know, a farmer organization. **And it turns out that the first master of Ashby Grange actually lived in this house,** Joel Hayward. I didn't know that at the time, but, in becoming more connected with the local library, I went through a couple of documents that listed, particularly, the Hayward family.

00:05:44.4 And this was one of the homes that that family occupied. And it makes specific reference to this Joel Hayward living here. A nice side of this story is that the farms were pretty much run-down and were looked at as a poor farming area.

00:06:13.3 When the so-called “Yankees” who owned the farms sold to these immigrants, they were thinking that they were taking advantage of them. And that they were unloading something that they didn't really want anymore.

00:06:34.3

John Mickola: But, like in many immigrant-type situations, the Finns jumped at the chance because they had the knowledge to bring the farms back, to fertilize the ground, to enliven it again. So they thought of this as, wow, a great opportunity, which indeed was the case.

00:07:00.1 When my grandfather lived here, they had probably eight or ten cows. They had probably four or five hundred chickens. There were blueberries. So, in the summer, the factories in Fitchburg got so hot that people would pass out. They couldn't work. And there was, of course, no unemployment or vacation time. So the factories shut down, and the families had no visible means of support.

00:07:33.8 So, because they were part of this Finnish community, they would come to places like Ashby, Ashburnham, Hubbardston, all these different places that had blueberries, and, it would be like a vacation for them. But they would pick blueberries at that time when the crop was ready and, it would be at \$0.10/quart, handpicked, high-bush berries.

00:08:02.1 But in those days that was excellent money. **And, in fact, the gentleman who donated the Ashby Library, Mr. Chapman, Edwin Chapman, actually got his start in business by being a salesman, a broker, for the farmers in Ashby to the markets in Boston.**

00:08:30.6

John Mickola: He would drive up to the hill here every day, or every other day, and pick up crates of blueberries that were picked by the community, and then bring them into Boston and sell them. So, that's kind of a unique connection that way as well.

00:08:56.5 The blueberry pastures were all fenced in, so the cows would use that, and then the farmers would use that as a natural fertilization technique. The cows would go in and, and, chomp the grass around the blueberries, and there were so many berries and bushes that they didn't really affect the crop that way.

00:09:20.7 And then, as I understand it, each fall the farmers would get together and they would burn their fields, from stone wall to stone wall.

John Mickola: So that the next year would produce a good crop. It was a very—it was a thriving business at that time. **Nobody got rich, but they all made a living.**

00:09:45.8 **Likewise, the Fitchburg United Cooperative Farmers was begun by the Finns to again pool their resources in terms of their other agricultural products**—namely, in this case, milk. Each farmer had a few cows. They would milk their cows, fill up their cans of milk, and then there would be a system of volunteerism where somebody would bring the milk down to Fitchburg to the dairy, where they would then bottle it and then it would be distributed.

00:10:27.0 **When they got together, realizing that if they had some buying power together they could purchase grain in bulk as well, that started the United Cooperative grain industry as well;** there was a grocery store. I don't know if you've been in this area long enough to know where the Workers' Credit Union is, in the Upper Common was United Cooperative Farmers' Grocery Store.

00:10:59.8

John Mickola: When I was a kid, we'd—that was our exclusive place to shop. And we would save all of our slips, and at the end of the year, turn those in and the profits from the company were divided among—because we were members of the cooperative. So, the idea of, of [chuckles] cooperatives is not a new idea. It's a pretty old idea, actually.

00:11:26.3

Interviewer: So, have you actually been in the area your whole life?

John Mickola: I have been in the area my whole life. I wasn't born in the house. My dad was. But, I was born over in Gardner. Except for a short stint going to

college, Boston University, and then I moved back in the '70s, and I've been here ever since.

Interviewer: You mentioned your involvement with the Grange. Can you say any more about that?

00:11:57.8

John Mickola: **I joined the Grange when I was a sophomore in high school, 1963, and I, stayed a member, for actually 49 years.** Two or three years ago, we disbanded the Grange. The members—I don't want to get political, but the members in our Grange felt that the Grange as it was today was not going in a direction that really supported local agriculture, that they were more interested in big agriculture and, in some ways, non-agricultural activities.

00:12:38.8 We felt that we could do—the members of our local Grange felt that we could do more, locally, without supporting an organization that didn't seem to have that direction. You know, whether it's changed or not, or whether it is changing, I can't say for sure. But, we've—ever since—

00:13:00.9 One of our members, the Perna family, back in late '60s, began to make their own maple syrup on their farm. And as a result, began to host what we call "sugar suppers." For the first couple years, it was basically a family or a Grange event for members, and then we began to realize that it might be a way to raise money to support the Grange and the charities that we were interested in.

00:13:36.8 **It really has become a tradition in our town, for the last—**what's that now? 40 years—

Interviewer: 50.

John Mickola: [chuckles] **50 years, to have this annual sugar supper.** So when the Grange disbanded— it actually had started in Ashby in 1888. So about 1888 the first master was living here at the time. The house, I think, as far as I can tell, was built about 1875. So when my grandfather bought it in 1907, it was relatively new. And it was actually built in the same year that he was born. He was born in 1875. So he was in his early 30s when he came here to Ashby to farm.

00:14:28.7 We still carry on that tradition of the sugar supper, which is basically the maple syrup, that is boiled a little bit longer than for pancake syrup, so that it has more of a taffy-type quality. And, the tradition was that the first boiling, the farmers would make that syrup and then pour it on the snow outside of the sugarhouse. And then eat it that way. So that's the dessert.

00:15:05.1 For a number of years we had raised pigs here. And we used a local ham for the supper. The beans were baked—are still baked in maple syrup. So we had maple syrup baked beans. A local member— my sister actually now— makes the donuts on.

00:15:32.5 So it's quite a family tradition anyway. And everybody seemed to have a lot of fun. We moved from the Grange Hall, which is in the center of town still, waiting for a new occupant, to one of the churches, the Unitarian Church where we do the supper.

Interviewer: Why is this property important to you, or special?

00:15:59.6

John Mickola: Well, in the years that I've lived here, okay, as I stand in the yard, everything I see I own, okay? And the only house that was different was

the one across the street that my sister and her husband built. And it took the place of a garage, actually, that my grandfather used.

00:16:23.9 **Part of the deal, when you were a farmer back then, and still is, was that you needed to work off the place in order to supplement your income.** So, my grandfather ran the school bus for the kids on Jones Hill Road to get to town. And that garage held the so-called “school bus.”

00:16:47.4 At first, it was a covered wagon, a barge, pulled by horses. And then they, in the ‘30s, the late ‘20s, they came of age and he had bought a Packard limousine, 12-passenger. It certainly wouldn’t meet the qualifications today of, you know, standards. But, and the story goes, every night in the winter, in order to make sure that the bus ran the next day, they would drain the oil from the crank case, bring it up here to the kitchen and keep it on the stove to keep it warm, so that when they, the next morning, pour it back in the car so it would be warm enough to crank the motor over and get it going.

00:17:45.3

Interviewer: Whew, that’s labor intensive.

John Mickola: It’s a whole different way of dealing with things. Yeah, exactly. I had an old friend who did ride on that school barge. And as more kids came into the neighborhood and the barge couldn’t be stretched, my grandfather extended the back of the wagon by adding planks out further so the kids would have a place to sit.

00:18:24.5 Yeah. And, the other story that he’d tell—funny story he tells, this old fellow—he was kind of a rough-and-tumble guy. In the wintertime, a lot

of times they would use a sleigh instead of the school barge. So, on the other side of the hill here, there's—you know, we're on the top of a hill, so when you go down, it's kind of steep.

00:18:52.8 that side had a particular corner that was kind of sharp. This fellow and one of his friends decided one day that they wanted to see if they could make the sleigh tip up onto one edge, you know. They were in the back corner and on the lower end, as they were coming around the curve—and I'm sure they weren't going all that fast.

00:19:23.5 Sure enough the sleigh lifted up some and they lost their balance and the two kids fell into the road. And, my grandfather knew what they were doing so [chuckles], it was a different era, he kept going. And it's like, okay, fellas, you've got to find your own way now.

00:19:47.3 This fellow said they ran all the way to school, and they were hoping nobody would talk when they got home because they would be in big trouble. Needless to say, they didn't do that again. [laughs]

Interviewer: Where was the school at that time?

00:20:02.0

John Mickola: It was in the center of town where it is right now. Where the town hall is. That was the school. There were probably four or five routes in town. You know, there were no "bus." It was not a bus. So different members of the town got paid to bring the kids in their neighborhood to school.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd want to say about why this place is special to you?

00:20:34.2

John Mickola: I started to say that—you'll never believe, the last ten years now, there are houses built on all sides of my property, in what was woods: land that would be marginally buildable back in the day when my grandfather was around. We could see the crunch of land, of people—good, well-intentioned people wanting a place in the country, to be living in places that deer and turkey and moose and trees exist.

00:21:17.3

My wife and I are fervent believers in the desirability of open space, in terms of the mix of what will keep the earth sustainable. We wanted to ensure that at least this piece of property would not be split up. Because, again, as I said, in the last ten years, I've seen houses built around me and on our road in places that are, really, kind of mindboggling to me to see.

00:21:53.2

So we wanted to preserve the land. And I had five children. All are grown, have their own places. So in terms of the future, I don't really know how that will play out. You know, I may be the last generation to live on the place. But perhaps not.

00:22:17.7

Regardless, it's going to stay the way it is, intact, the way my grandfather bought it, less the three-and-a-half acres across the street.

Interviewer:

That's remarkable. These changes that you described, you would describe them as negative changes, of course. Do you see these same changes beyond your property, in the region?

00:22:43.7

John Mickola:

Oh, definitely. As I said, on the other side of the hill, is a side-hill. The road is kind of on the edge, is cut into the side of the hill. And then on the

downhill side, four or five houses have been built, chalet-type situations. When my dad and mom got married, my mother took over driving the school bus. On one particular occasion, in this same area where these houses are now built, it was a field, okay?

00:23:23.1 One morning, as my mom was driving the kids to school, she met another neighbor who was coming up and being a little more in the middle of the road than she should've been. So my mom pulled—to avoid this person, a little bit over the edge of the road. And the car rolled over with the kids in it, down in the field, landed car upright.

00:23:56.5 And in those days, the metal in the cars, this Packard it was, they were like a tank. There was a little bit of bending on the running boards, that was it. The kids probably thought it was pretty exciting anyway, as well. [chuckles]

00:24:15.4 Nobody was hurt, as I said. But right now, there are five houses right there, in an area that was swamp, then pasture, more or less. So, yeah, our open land...

00:24:32.7 **When I was a kid, every house on this road was a farm, a farmhouse with farmland around it.** Slowly being eroded in terms of agriculture, but still staying as a house and fields, and somebody was doing the haying. And since that time, there's really not one farm, full-time farm.

00:25:01.8 You know, I do some farming, but I don't consider it a full-time occupation. And the farm across from us, the Packards, who just purchased it —

[END PART ONE]

[BEGIN PART TWO]

00:00:00.5

John Mickola: —decided to keep their land open. So it's slowly coming back. I call it, for want of a better term, "gorilla farming." And I don't think it's any different than it really was even in my grandfather's or my dad's time. But, less people who want their half-acre—well, it can't be a half-acre, two acres and their suburban house and commute to work somewhere near the city.

00:00:31.6

Which is part of my intention, in terms of putting the easement on our property is the hope that it stays in that kind of mixed-use situation, where there's still open land, where there are people who understand farming. So if they hear a rooster, they're not going to call the Board of Health right away.

00:00:57.6

And if I see some horse droppings on the road, I pick it up and put it in my garden. I don't call the Board of Health and say, "Oh, somebody's defacing the road."

Interviewer:

If you could make one thing different, what would it be?

00:01:14.3

John Mickola:

Make one thing different...I think I'm pretty much—I wouldn't say I'm a fatalist, but I understand that the tramp of time and the evolution of what goes on... As I said, just a little while ago, this transition of the neighborhood from all Finns—from all Yankees to all Finns—and now to kind of a mixed use...

- 00:01:53.1 I probably would hope that we would get a little more permanence in those who live here. When I was a kid, I could hear the rattle of a car coming down the road and I'd know who it was. I can't say that I know all my neighbors now, all the people who live on the road. It could be partly me as well. But as I started out saying, this was a true cooperative back in the day. Everybody helped each other out.
- 00:02:25.9 Certainly there were there were, rivalries, friendly rivalries. One of the stories goes that, one reason my dad—we have a sauna now. When—that was one of the things that I was really adamant in building once we got ourselves established here. But my dad was not a great fan of the sauna because, when he was a kid, he—you know, in the Finnish tradition, the men go to sauna together and the women go together.
- 00:02:59.5 So he, as a kid, would be going in with men, his dad, my grandfather, and the neighborhood Finns. And, that's probably not unusual. There would be sometimes a little bit of competition about who could take the most heat in the sauna. And as a young kid, he was expected—you know, they were pretty strict in terms of kids are to do what their adults, parents, tell them to do.
- 00:03:29.4 So he would be sitting in between his grandfather and the neighbor, who would be taking this heat in, and, part of the Finnish sauna tradition is you get a bunch of birch twigs with the leaves on them and you bang yourself to get the circulation, the blood to come up to your surface so you have more circulation.
- 00:03:50.9 Well, he would be in the middle of these two big guys swatting themselves, and so, when it came time for him [laughs] to have sauna, he

got in, he got washed up—because sauna was a bath. It wasn't just taking steam and going out to have a shower later on. It was—you washed and cleansed yourself.

00:04:09.9 So he would go in, get himself clean and leave. He didn't really—he had that, that vision of getting the swatting and have to stay there. You know, he couldn't, he couldn't go out. So, yeah, that was always a great tradition.

00:04:28.0 **My hope would be that people would become a little more permanent and would look at this more as their home than a transition spot until they can move on to something bigger and whatever, better.**

Interviewer: What kind of farming are you doing?

00:04:46.9

John Mickola: I have worked to keep the fields in our neighborhood open. So, I cut and sell probably about 1,000 bales of hay every year. I raise a couple of llamas right now for pets. We've raised our own meat birds. We're raising some turkeys now for Thanksgiving. I've named them Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter. [laughter]

00:05:14.6 And then we have one more which will find their way to some party or gathering that we have. In the past, when we had all of our kids living here, we raised pigs. We raised beef animals. I've always been involved in agriculture that way. My wife is an avid gardener. So we are pretty much raising all of our vegetables that we have, that we're eating now fresh and that we'll be having in the wintertime. We have a freezer that we store that in.

00:05:47.8 So more sustainable kinds of agriculture for ourselves than anything else. In my past history, I have hayed, just like my grandparents and my dad, I have hayed every field in the neighborhood, on the road, at one time or another. And slowly they've become house lots and, I regret that. I wish that we could have more, continued.

00:06:22.1 But there are some success stories, so it's not over. It's not over yet. And, I think our neighborhood, the town in general, attracts, and seems to attract more people who are interested in small-time farming and open land, as opposed to development. Also, the, land is not really, doesn't lend itself to very easy development.

00:06:54.9 We have what I call the "driveway to nowhere" down below us here that has been on the market for probably about 12 years, because anybody who's going to build there—it's a beautiful spot, but it's going to take a lot of funds to do that and a lot of determination. Again, the driveway is like this (makes nearly vertical angle with hand). And so, you have to really want to be there in order to—

00:07:18.7 my grandparents would probably have rolled their eyes if they knew that anybody was thinking about actually living there, yeah.

Interviewer: What would you say to the next generation?

00:07:32.5

John Mickola: I would say "more of the same." You have a tradition. You have a legacy. And while you can't get stuck in the past, you need to learn from that. That was one thing that I always enjoyed about the Grange. There's a great ritual that's connected with it. And part of the advice in that ritual

was always to take notes, to understand what's going on, that change is the ongoing, natural way of things. And to be able to ride with that rather than to hold it back.

00:08:11.6 You can't hold it back. So you need to realize that and work with it. At one point, I read the history of Ashby, that there were all kinds of different attempts at agriculture, different kinds of agriculture. Grapes were a big item back in the 1900s. And even now there are grapevines everywhere. There's a lot of times they don't produce grapes. But they are a remnant of that situation.

00:08:48.6 There, my grandparents had a corn crib, so I know that they grew corn for the animals. The barn has gone through a number of changes. There was a silo that was constructed in the middle of the back of the barn, so that they would fill that. Then in the winter they didn't have to go outside. They could get the feed from the silo right there.

00:09:16.2 I know that there are stories of growing sugar beets, or, ... I don't think they're called sugar beets. But beets as fodder for the animals as well.

00:09:29.0 You know, back in the Finnish community time, the women did the milking, and they tended to the animals. The men made the hay, plowed the garden, cut the wood. But the women were the husbanders [sic] of the of the animals. And all the pictures that I have of the women, they would have what the Finns called a [weavy.] They'd have a kerchief around their head because when they milked the cows their head would be rubbing against their bellies, because it was all done by hand.

00:10:08.1 And, so they protected themselves from, you know, the smell. And they worked right alongside the men, as a team effort to make a go of it. It had to be a team effort. It couldn't be just one side or the other.

Interviewer: I see that you have some, photos there. Is there anything you'd like to hold up and share?

00:10:32.1

John Mickola: Well, this is what the house looked like in 1907 when my grandfather bought it. And I can't say for sure that that's him or some of his family in the picture. But as you can see, the—

Interviewer: Oh yeah, that's right outside the door here, isn't it?

00:10:57.8

John Mickola: Yeah, that's right. The part—the place we're sitting in is the kitchen. And you can see it had a flat roof. And the year I was born, my dad got tired of shoveling the snow off the flat roof, so they hired a Finn—of course, a Finnish carpenter to put a peaked roof on and remodel the kitchen. There used to be a bulkhead, into the cellar in front of the house there. And my dad moved it around to the side so it's no longer there.

00:11:34.0 **A couple of years ago we remodeled the kitchen again.** We took the cabinets out that were in here. **And I joked with the cabinet people that these cabinets were put in the year I was born, and, my wife said the cabinets have to go, but I could stay.** [laughter] And I don't know if you can see this. You might need to do some finagling with that, but this is a picture of my grandfather on a tractor that killed—eventually killed him.

00:12:06.2 In 1940, he was on the back field, behind our house here. He was pulling out stones with this tractor, and it reared up and flipped over onto him, crushed him under weight of the steering wheel. There was no ambulance service in those days. The neighbors—he was a pretty big guy. The neighbors got him picked up and into the back of one of the cars, and they brought him to Fitchburg. But by the time he got there, he was too far gone and he passed away, 65 years old.

00:12:44.1

Interviewer: What a shame.

John Mickola: And, so a few years ago, when I was doing the haying on this field—the side of the field is quite steep. More than once I've slid sideways down there with the baler on the tractor. So my wife and my sister decided that that was not a good idea, they convinced me to plant Christmas trees over there, which we still have today on that side.

00:13:12.2

John Mickola: I do have a four-wheel-drive tractor now, so I don't think it would be quite as difficult. But more than one person has had exciting experiences over there.

00:13:23.0 This, I don't know if the light's going to be in the way, but this is a picture of my grandfather and my dad, a couple of other individuals in haying season, [unintelligible]. Standing in front of a truck that's been loaded with hay, ready to go into the barn.

Interviewer: Excellent. Would you show us some of the property now?

John Mickola: I would be glad to.

00:13:57.2

John Mickola: —to the house. He was about at the corner of the barn and all of a sudden water was bubbling up. He came over to me, very worried, and said, “Did I break a water line or whatever?” I said, “No, there’s no water line there whatsoever.” It’s a spring that’s under the ground, right there at the corner of the building.

00:14:20.4 And actually we still have our water, comes from a well that’s on top of the hill, gravity feed, so no electricity, no pump involved. It’s all Mother Nature’s work.

Interviewer: Well, I’m going to pan here, and then I’m—we’ll have to step out.

[panning from house to barn]

00:14:41.3

John Mickola: Yeah, so originally this was all connected. I decided, since the barn managed to stay up on its own, this end of the barn, that I would keep it going.

Interviewer: This, solar array wasn’t here originally.

00:15:03.7

John Mickola: The solar array was not here. Right there was a building that houses the blueberry crates and paraphernalia for the summer work, which was since gone when I came.

Interviewer: And I take it this tree has been here for a while?

John Mickola: 1941 we had a fellow who was a distant relative who was, what we called back in those days, a hired man. And, right beside that tree was a pear tree. And in the picture that I showed you of the house, the pear tree is what is showing. And it was beginning to die.

00:15:49.0 The hired man went down to the meadow and pulled up a sugar maple sapling, and he brought it up to the house and said, he announced to my parents that it's time to plant a new tree on the lawn because the other one was dying. They planted that tree in 1941 and it's been there ever since.

Interviewer: Excellent. Shall we take a little stroll here?

00:16:14.7

John Mickola: Sure. You can see the foundation in the back—a cement box that would have ice in it, and, until it could go to, until they could deliver it to Fitchburg. So the milk house has since gone on to, to fame and fortune in Ashburnham, and become a—we moved it to a house over there, where they use it for a tool shed.

00:17:03.4 When I was a kid, there was no more milk being made. We used it for a chicken house. I can remember as a kid there was always a rooster. When I would go in to collect the house, that darn rooster would chase me out every day. I would go flapping out and, and he would be following me for a while.

00:17:25.9

Interviewer: You said there was a chicken house here?

John Mickola: From where the sauna is up to that pile of wood and, on. That whole area there was a chicken house, which we have since taken down.

00:17:47.7 I don't know if you can see. Beyond the chicken tractor here is our workshop. My grandfather, again, necessarily being a Renaissance man—not by choice maybe, but by necessity—he would do his own blacksmith work. So he would shoe his own horses. Any metal kinds of repairs would happen in the blacksmith shop.

00:18:19.5 At one point, apparently, before I was born the shop caught fire and burned. My dad rebuilt it, so that's not the original, original shop, but it definitely fills the same function, and it still does today. I don't shoe any horses, but I definitely use it for repairs of the equipment.

00:18:52.7 I don't want to make it any harder for the people that are going to have to do the chores than necessary, so, we'll leave 'em inside.

Interviewer: So we've got an older tractor and a newer tractor.

John Mickola: Right. This tractor here my dad bought in 1950, and he, besides being the road superintendent, always mowed the roadsides in Ashby, Townsend and Mason, New Hampshire, actually, too. He bought this tractor to be able to do that. It was state-of-the-art. You can see the mower is on the side, so that as you're driving down the road, you can move the blade up and down to miss obstructions.

00:19:34.1 It's been in our family ever since, and I lovingly maintain and restore it and use it. I just used it to cut one of the field, actually. Yeah.

Interviewer: And the one behind you?

00:19:47.3

John Mickola: The big blue one is my concession to modernism. A couple years ago, we had a particularly snowy year, and after I was plowing my driveway, I would come in looking like a snowman. I finally decided, at my advanced age, that I needed to have some protection. So, I made an investment in the tractor with the cover, with the cab on it.

Interviewer: So, how many fields do you think you do?

00:20:21.5

John Mickola: I, right now, do about eight fields, probably about 35 acres, 4 fields on my property, and then, on the other side of the hill, 4 fields that haven't been, you know, made into houses yet, and that the people are grateful to keep them open as fields.

Interviewer: How many bales is that?

00:20:50.0

John Mickola: About 1,000 bales, yeah.

When, when I was a kid, the backside of this field was an apple orchard. And my dad determined at the time that we weren't really going to be in the apple business. He had a neighbor push the trees out. And then didn't really get around to taking them all, the trees totally out. So it was left to me to be the tree cleaner, since then.

00:21:32.3 So I put it back into a grass field.

Interviewer: And how big a field is this?

John Mickola: This field is probably five acres. And we have the one on the top of the hill, a million-dollar view. You can see Boston and the North Shore.

00:21:58.3 I've maintained roads into the woods. We have probably 30 acres of woods and 20 acres of field and open land. **On the hundredth anniversary of our family owning the farm, back in 2007, we had kind of a celebration.** Actually there's a picture in the kitchen.

00:22:33.2 A fellow one day knocked on the door and introduced himself and told me that he was part of a company that takes aerial photos of, you know, farms, area farms. So he presented us with this, picture of the farm as it is today, taken from the air. It being the hundredth anniversary there, we thought it was quite serendipitous. We ended up buying it. It's in the kitchen there as well and sort of reflects, you know, what it looks like now, compared to what it was back in the day.

00:23:19.9 The story I told you about the blueberry man coming to pick up the blueberries. But he would bring his binoculars—and, again, wood was king in those days in terms of fuel and every other kind of byproduct. So the land didn't look anywhere near as wooded, or wasn't anywhere near as wooded as it is today.

00:23:48.2 And he could see the Bunker Hill Monument from our dooryard. Yeah. We're that high up. And, you know, I said that this whole neighborhood was Finnish descent, but a lot of Finns in New Ipswich as well, and even though you can't see it today, there's houses to the—where would it be?—to the northeast of us, through the woods.

00:24:18.7 And my aunts would tell me that they quite often would walk from our house, not through the woods but through fields, up to those houses and visit the people that were living there as well.

00:24:34.2 So, in one way, the change in the economy has done well for the growth of the forest, because they were having to range further and further to find woodlots to cut. Most of the time, it was pretty much of a clear-cut kind of a situation. But, as you can see, in the last 30 years things have come back pretty strongly.

00:25:08.1 And I've taken—I've had lumber cut here on a couple of occasions, and that's part of our conservation restriction, that we do—what do they call it?—husband the woods, I guess.

Interviewer: Stewardship.

John Mickola: Stewardship, right. And, I have the outdoor wood furnace right now, which takes about 12 cords of wood every year. So that keeps me busy as well. [chuckles]

00:25:38.4 So this picture was taken in 2007, and it shows the property pretty much the way it is. You can see the llamas in the bottom corner there. You can see the buildings that I have added since I've lived here, the sauna and the...

00:26:09.1 This part here is totally, somewhat new, 1975. So that's, what, 35 years or so? And you can see the big field behind the house. You can see the meadow in front of the house. And up in the very right corner, a phenomenon which has occurred not all that long ago, beavers moved in.

As a kid, there was always just woods there. I never even knew that there would be enough water.

00:26:55.0

And the **beaver found an old stone wall in the back and they plugged it up, and next thing you know we have probably, I don't know, a 30-acre pond in a perfect place. It's in a recess. It can't really flood out the road or anybody's property. It's like ideal. And we have a resident heron there, not to mention the fish, wildlife.** It's been a great addition.