

Alice Emery, interviewed by Miles de Klerk, Jan. 7, 2011

M: Could you tell me about little bit about yourself? Your background, where you're from?

AE: Well, I'm not Jewish either, but I worked for the Alfonds for 45 years. I went there when their youngest son was 10 and the oldest one was 18 and I, you know, took care of the family and in the later years, well, I was the caregiver to Mr. and Mrs. Alfond. The children were mostly gone by the time I got there except for Peter, and he was like in the 6th grade or something, and I use to go skiing and things with him so I got a little association with some of the Jewish children in Waterville, but not all of them, I must say.

M: Okay, just really quickly, you said something about skiing, where did you guys go skiing?

AE: Sugarloaf.

M: Sugarloaf, can you tell me anything about the experience of skiing at Sugarloaf?

AE: I didn't ski that much because I hurt my back the second year I was there [2:22]. But this was back in '62 and the place was well started, but it didn't have the lifts or the trails that it has today. I think the month of January was pretty much inside the lodge for a lot of them because it was so cold. (M: [laughs]) You know, socializing, but they all became good skiers, they all did. And it was a really a family thing because up to that point Mr. and Mrs. Alfond used to go a lot, but once I started taking them when the kids was older, they didn't go as much. But it was only like a three year thing with me going up there because then Peter went away to Eaglebrook School, he went down to Massachusettes.

M: Oh okay, is that a high school? Or what kind of school was it?

AE: It was 7 through 9.

M: Oh, okay.

AE: It was at Eaglebrook and then they all went to either Governor Dummer or Kent's Hill or, that was it, those two schools.

M: Where are those schools?

AE: Governor Dummer's down in Byfield, Mass., and the two of them went there. The two oldest ones went to Kent's Hill school over here in Maine, it's just west of Augusta.

M: Ah okay. Alright, well before we go any further I'm just going to make a statement for the recording and get your consent and stuff. Today is Friday, January

7th, 2011. My name is Miles de Klerk, I'm at Colby College interviewing Alice Emery over the phone. Alice, do I have permission to record this interview?

AE: Yes you do.

M: Alright, thank you. Alright, so can you tell me about life in the Alfond household?

AE: It was pretty much as it was in the other households, all I must say is, as well off as the Alfonds were [4:44] they were not a show-off people. It was not a kosher family, they live pretty much just like everybody else in town. They weren't kosher and they weren't the Orthodox Jews. Mr. Alfond was completely involved in sports and his business, and of course he was traveling, watching his kids play basketball and football all over the place. Mrs. Alfond was a very community-minded woman and she was involved in two Jewish charities and then she was also involved with the Little Wanderers and school and things like that [5:42].

M: Excellent, thank you. You mentioned Mr. Alfond's involvement with sports and with his kids, can you tell me some more about that?

AE: Well, it didn't make any difference what was going on at the factory, if there was a game, he was at the game (M: [laughs]) with all of his kids, especially the ones that were right here in Maine. He was very involved with Kent's Hill when I first came and then, when the other kids were down in Massachusetts going to prep school for things, he was down there whenever they had a game, he was there, they could almost depend on him. He loved going to, you know, I remember him going to the World Series from the time I went there. He went to almost every World Series for years. When they started having the football, Super Bowls and things like that, he was there. I don't remember him going to the basketball tournaments so much, in the winter, but they were great golfers, that was a great family thing with all of them, all three boys played golf and Susan was a good golfer but she wasn't really that interested in it, she was interested more in the social life. That's all I can think of right now.

M: Okay. [7:17]. Well, touching on that, the aspect of a social life, how did you see the social lives of the Alfond children in the Waterville community?

AE: Actually, I didn't see them involved that much because, like I say, the youngest one was 10 when I went there. Billy, one of the boys, went to Colby College, and he was very much involved in social life and working and at that time he was involved with the Muskie campaign for President in '68. They always had their own special friends that they would come home to and were really friendly with and their social life, a lot of it was maintained through Sugarloaf because they went up there skiing in the wintertime when they came home for vacation. Most of the time, once a year they would go down south for, you know, one of their vacations. But, that was the mostly, the most of it I think.

M: Okay. So Sugarloaf was a big social center; a lot of kids went there to ski.

AE: Right.

M: Can you remember kind of what parts of the Waterville community were represented at Sugarloaf? What kinds of kids were there?

AE: [8:53] A lot of them went, There was the Miller children, Howard Miller was a part of the Levine store, there was the Shiro children that went, there was the Beckermans. Those were one that were mostly in that age group at that time, that would, you know, be going up there at the same time they were. Wolmans, the Wolman family was in that age group, they use to go to Sugarloaf quite a bit. But that's about the extent of the ones that I remember.

M: Okay, thank you. So you mentioned earlier when you were talking about the Alfond household that Mrs. Alfond was a large part of the Jewish community, can you tell me some more about that?

AE: Mrs. Alfond?

M: [Mhmm]

AE: Yeah, she was always involved, they had Hadassah and I can't remember the name of the other Jewish group and they were always, you know, doing different things for the synagogue and for the community and they was always raising money because it was a small group of, you know, comparatively small group of Jewish people, so they all had to work hard maintain the synagogue and keep Jewish life going down there. The only one, Peter was the only one who was involved in the Hebrew school and things at the time when I was there, the rest of them were all through with that. And they quite often came home for they, you know, Yom Kippur and Passover and things like those, the high holidays [10:54] of the Jewish religion. But, that's about what I remember. She was really more involved in Waterville Women's Club and the, like I say, the Little Wanderers. She was always working on comities for the Little Wanderers to raise money and things like that.

M: Yeah, that was going to be my next question. Could you tell me some more about her efforts in raising money and that type of stuff, the philanthropy, one of my classmates in very interested in that, so I'd love to hear some more about that.

AE: They were very, anything that was concerning children, they we're very interested, and I know Mr. Alfond, everyone said he was just a sports, you know, enthusiast. But that's not true, he was very involved with the colleges, with the schools. I know: I went to a little school up here in Norridgewock, Maine, and when we got burned out he came in and he gave anything they wanted. They wanted a new freezer or something new for their cafeteria, he built a new gym for them. I mean, he was interested in all of the communities, but he did a lot more for, you know, the colleges and all over the United States, I mean mostly the East Coast, all the way from here to Florida. (M: Wow) His name is everywhere, he had a lot to do with Rollins College [??] down there and he's had a lot to do down with the hospitals. Mrs. Alfond was a volunteer at the Thayer Hospital, you know, twice a

week for many years while I was there. I think the Little Wanderers was her pet love, I mean she was very fond of that, in fact she I think helped to, if I'm right, she helped to organize the organization and get it off the ground when they start years ago.

M: Could you tell me some more about the Little Wanderers? What's nature of the group?

AE: The nature of the group [13:17] is taking, originally taking in children for adoption and putting them out for adoption, and now it's a big organization taking in single mothers and helping them through having the children and helping to decide whether to keep it or to have it adopted and to help set up their lives so that they can take care of their children if they want to take care of them. There is a tremendous daycare center down there, where mothers and children go to learn, you know, the things they need to know in life. A lot of them don't have mothers to teach them, so the Little Wanderers kind of takes that over. And it's a tremendous organization and Mrs. Alfond has been, I mean there are a couple of things on the campus that are named for her, a couple of the buildings and that was one of her pet loves that she had, plus Goodwill Hinkley School, which is kind of down out right now, but I think its on its way back. Mr. Alfond and Mrs. Alfond both, they built a center up there for where people could stay when they came to visit to the school or for the trustees and things. So, they were involved in anything that had children involved, that's where they were [14:52].

M: Well, that's very interesting. I'd like to shift focus here a little bit to something that you talked about earlier, the non-kosher nature of the family. Can you tell me some more about that? Was there strictly no kosher food at all or did they make kind of effort to follow dietary rules?

AE: Not really, no, when I was hired to go there everybody was telling me, "oh, you are going to have a hard time, you know, keeping a kosher house and things," but it wasn't, it wasn't ever a kosher house. Mrs. Alfond's family was kosher, the generation before, but she never kept a kosher house at all, there was none of the meats or anything. In fact, they ate lobster, which is not a kosher food. They never change their dishes like a lot of the kosher people did. There was some families in the town that were that way, but you never would know it outside.

M: Can you tell me a little bit of what types of food you did prepare for them and what kind of memories of have about the dining and stuff at the family dinner table, things like that?

AE: They were very simple, and I'd almost describe it as country eaters. They liked not terribly seasoned food, they liked, you know, the chickens and steaks, and I remember serving quite a lot of lamb down there at different times. It was all very simple, and they weren't fancy eaters [16:46]. They were, I mean, anybody could go and eat with them and feel comfortable, it didn't make any difference if you came off

of a farm or if you came out of New York City. You know, that's how they were; anybody could come in and feel at home.

M: Okay. You were just mentioning, they sound like very open people, do you have any sense of how the community of Waterville saw the Alfonds?

AE: Well, I never heard anybody say anything against them. I always heard, you know, good things from them, everybody loved her [Mrs. Alford] as a person, I mean they both were so down to earth that, you know, I remember one picture taken of Mr. Alford sitting with his feet up on a desk, being interviewed by somebody and his shoes we're almost worn through on the bottoms and they weren't showoff people at all. Even when I lived in Palm Beach with them for probably over 20 years and it wasn't showoff down there, they had a certain group of people, but they weren't with the ones that went to the fancy balls and all the kind of stuff. They just weren't that type of people, socialized people. I don't know what to say other than that, they just were so common. I remember one time being down there and they were having a party for one of the boys and there was people, you know, working around there and one young fellow came up to Mr. Alford and he says, "Boy, must be nice to have the money so you can put party on like this and sit back and do nothing," and Mr. Alford says, "It sure must be," and there he was working right beside this kid (M: [laughs]) and he had no idea who he was. That's the type of person they were, you had no idea that they had anything.

M: Very interesting. Okay so I'm going to ask you some more questions about the family. Do you have any stand-out memories, or what can you tell me about their holiday traditions? You mentioned the high holidays and stuff, can you tell me anything about that [19:29]?

AE: Not too much. Actually, when it came to the high holidays they use to go over to Mrs. Alford's family house pretty much for the high holidays. I didn't have to do too much of the cooking for those type of meals. And they would get together, and they weren't really church-going people a lot, but they would go on the high holidays and they would fast. I can't remember, I think it was fall holiday, that they would fast and the next day they would go out and have chicken and that kind of food, you know, after they had the day of fasting. They really weren't temple-people, they didn't take the time for that kind of thing. They believed in it, Mr. Alford in fact was one of the big benefactors of the temple there in Waterville. But they did not attend, I must say that much, that's about all I can say about that.

M: Okay, so they didn't go to temple a lot, but you did mention that they still had kind of a strong Jewish identity. Can you tell me about that? What kind of things did they do to continue their Jewish identity even though they didn't go to temple?

AE: They wanted all of their children to, all the boys to be bar mitzvahed, that was an important thing in any family down there, I think. But after that they were, you know, it was up to them to decide what they wanted to and what they didn't want to do. Basically, that was about the only training that they had, you know. I just think

that Mrs. Alfond's family was here from Russia and so was his and that group of the family kept the Jewish holidays and things more, but then the next group, I think they were working harder and more interested in melting into the community than they were being standouts.

M: Hm, ok.

AE: They did melt into the community, because a lot of people would say, "I didn't know they were Jewish." Well they didn't bring that across, they didn't emphasize that in their lifestyles. So, that's how I remember it.

M: Okay. One of my classmates is very interested in Gisele Miller's story.

AE: Yes.

M: Do you have anything you can tell me about Gisele? Any memories?

AE: Oh, she was a lovely lady [23:03], and she was, I think she was from South Africa, if I remember right, from away somewhere. She and her husband met during the war. They were both translators, I believe. And she came to this country, and she was a hard worker in the Jewish field, I mean I think she brought a lot of the European customs with her for the Jewish people. She and Mrs. Alfond worked together a lot on committees and things for B'nai B'rith and Hadassah, the different Jewish things, and Gisele was a big promoter of the temple, she did a lot of work getting it decorated and having it redone and things like that. She was a wonderful cook, and in fact she was the one where they would have their Jewish holidays, that would break the fast at the end of Jewish holidays. I know that they were great bridge players, she and Mrs. Alfond, with a lot of the people in the community. I don't know, there are so many things, if I was asked a more specific question I could probably say something.

M: Oh, sure [24:44]. Well, let's see. I have here that she's from Algeria, and that's where Howard Miller met her. Do you remember any reaction in the community with Howard marrying someone from Algeria?

AE: I wasn't there at that time.

M: Okay.

AE: But, I do remember them telling stories, you know, and Howard was great prankster.

M: Oh, really?

AE: And I remember them telling me the story that he called his mother and told her that he was bring home, you know, a bride from over there and he said, "Mother, she's got a great big ring in her nose." [laughs] (M: [laughs]) I guess that was part of the culture over there, or something, so when she goes to meet her at the boat or wherever she came in, she couldn't believe how beautiful she was, because she was

a beautiful women, and, you know, she had none of those mannerisms at all. She had a very strong accent then, Algeria, I think that would be a French accent, that she had, it was quite impressive to listen to her talk. So, like I say, that's really before my being there.

M: Right.

AE: So I don't remember, but I know she was well accepted and at the time I was there everybody loved Gisele. She was a very busy, a very doing person.

M: Yeah, you mentioned that she was very involved with the temple and with the Jewish community; can you tell me anything in particular about that?

AE: [26:38] Well I remember, this is a story that I heard, that when Mr. Alford's oldest son was bar mitzvahed they had an old temple, it was done in some old building and Mr. Alford said, "We should have a new temple," and before the next boy, which was 4 years later, was bar mitzvahed they had a new temple there on upper Main Street. But before that, it was one where the men and women were separated and the women were always upstairs in, like a balcony, and the men were downstairs and this one here, now is, I can't remember the word they use for them, its not an Orthodox, it;s a [pause], I don't know what word I should use. This one they all sit together.

M: Could it have been a Conservative-

AE: Yeah! That's the word.

M: Okay. So which temple was this? That you were just speaking about?

AE: Its on upper Main Street in Waterville there-

M: Okay.

AE: You go by it every time you go into town, it's towards town from where all your McDonald's and Wendy's and all of those places.

M: Alright-

AE: The Jewish community clustered around that area because in those days they weren't suppose to ride and things so they were close to the area so they could walk to temple and things like that. Cause like, during the holidays, the Sabbath they weren't suppose to ride. So that's why they were all so close to where the temple was built [28:44].

M: Ok, so there was a Jewish part of town?

AE: It was where the majority of them were, was right in that area.

M: What do you remember about that area, anything striking?

AE: No, no, not really. Nobody really stood out, the houses didn't stand out or anything, and the kids didn't stand out. They all went to the regular schools right around that area, and they weren't always the biggest schools and all of that, but they just blended into the area. I remember Mrs. Alfond's oldest sister and brother owned a lot of property on Ticonic Street and Maple Street, down in that area. They were always trying to fix it up; when a house would become available they would buy it and fix it up so that the community would look good. So they were interested in the exterior, how it looked and where everything was.

M: Cool, okay. Alright, I'm going to shift focus here a little bit. I asked you about Sugarloaf earlier and that's because one of my classmates is very interested in that, but she's also interested in summer camps, family homes that members of the Jewish had. Did the Alfonds have a summer camp?

AE: Yes, actually there is a big compound down there now. It's on Great Pond.

M: Oh, really?

AE: Yes, I think there's 11 of them that have, you know, private homes there because Mrs. Alfond and her husband both believed that, you know, you couldn't put two families in a house together, and they never made them share. So they all, as the kids got older and got married and had families of their own, they all had their own original place to live. They have been very strong that way, the family, they still all come there and they all love the area, they are all very much involved in the Belgrade area. So there's a big thing going on right now, 'docks to doors' in Belgrade, so that they can dock their boats and go into the stores and things like that and the Alfonds were big contributors and they are working hard on that project. They all loved Belgrade, one of the granddaughters comes from California for two months, that's how she decided to move to California: only if she could spend those two months in Maine, and that's what she does.

M: Did you ever accompany them up to their summer camp in the Belgrade Lakes?

AE: Oh, I lived with them, wherever they lived, I lived.

M: Oh, okay.

AE: Their home was in Waterville, on Silver Street, and that was their winter home, and then summers from the first part of June until after the kids went back to school in September, they lived out on Great Pond. Then we'd move to Waterville, and in the first years that's where we stayed for the winter. But then after, let's see, it was about 30 years ago, they started going to Palm Beach for the winter [32:46]. And that's what they did until about 2 years before they got really sick and passed away, and wherever they went, I went.

M: So you were really a member of the family, almost.

AE: I was. That's what everyone says, I'm a member of the family. So that's why they asked me if I would be interviewed by you because they said that actually I knew more than they knew. (M: [laughs]) At those years they went away to school and they weren't interested in those kind of things. You know, the history and all. That's why I was invited to do this.

M: Yeah, okay. Well, another one of my classmates is very interested in the Alfond's business efforts and sort of the source of their income and that kind of stuff. Can you tell me about the Alfond shoe business?

AE: Actually, he started out here in my hometown, in Norridgewock in about 1940. And he came up and he picked up a guy and asked him if he knew of anything that was available for a factory, a shoe factory, and he said, "Yes, we've got one in my hometown." That's how it started out here in Norridgewock, Maine, in about 1940, maybe it was '39, I'm not sure. And he built up from a small business and he kept expanding, he was only out here a couple years, he sold himself and his business to Shoe Corp. of America. I think it was like a 20 year thing, that he had to stay with the company. And then he built buildings in Skowhegan, and there was some in Norridgewock [34:47] and some in ****can't make out word**** and you know, all around the place. In the late 50's, his time with them was up, so he started with his brother and his nephew, Dexter Shoes up in Dexter, Maine. They went had factories in Dexter and in Skowhegan, and in Newport, I think. They kept expanding and growing and when it came time for retirement, and Mr. Alfond wanted to sell out, that is when they sold Dexter Shoes to Warren Buffett.

M: Hm, wow.

AE: When they sold to Warren Buffett the dollar amount was discussed and Mr. Alfond says, "I don't want money, I want stock. I want stock in your business." And that is how he got so much of Warren Buffett's stock back in, I don't remember what year it was, it must have been 1990 or something like that. And that is how the business went, but when he started out with low price shoes and he got quite a few government contracts. He was making boots for the army, that was one of his big things, and I remember he did saddle shoes back in those days, and boat shoes and those were the type of things that he did [36:33]. But he always grew, he always was looking for a larger thing.

M: That's interesting, can you tell about how the community of Waterville saw their shoe business and what kind of interactions the company had with Waterville?

AE: None of his businesses were in Waterville and none of his shoe factories or anything, they were all outside. But, they had a lot of respect for Mr. Alfond, they knew him through the work he did for Colby College, for the Thayer Hospital, for the Boys Club, you know, he was a big part of the thing behind the new Boys Club the got there on North Street now. He went in one day and they wanted some money to work on the old one, and Mr. Alfond says, "Well if you're going to put that much money into it, why don't you just build a new one?" And that's how the new Boys

Club came to be a new factor. Waterville was very appreciative of him for what he did for them, but I like I say, his business didn't reflect on them very much because it wasn't in that city.

M: So you would say that Alfonds in general were just a big, important part of the community, and not having anything to do with their Jewish identity, they were just an important part of the Waterville community?

AE: That's how I see it.

M: Excellent.