

Transcript of an Interview with Grace Root May 19, 1960:
(from the William Palmer Papers, Hamilton College Archives)

Q: This is the 19th of May, 1960. I'm Donald Sade. I'm interviewing Mrs. Grace Root on the history of the Root property, the woods overlooking Kirkland Glen around each side of the Wood's Road and I hope we will be able to talk some about the pathway and gardens known as "Root Glen". If you would like to say something about the history of the tract as a whole, anywhere you'd like to start.

A: the records show that this tract was assembled in various parcels between 1900 and 1915 by my father-in-law Elihu Root. The route he built was known in the family at the Stone Road. Alongside this you'll see blossoming the columbines which he planted by seed.

Q: Now, what is the Stone Road? Could you describe where it is?

A: It is the road that goes through the tract of land.

Q: That's what we now call the Wood's Road?

A: Yes, it is. Now starting from the west entrance on this Stone Road or Wood's Road, the turnings that Mr. Root itemized on his daily summer walks are first the Maple Gove, then Striped Bark Point, Hobblebush Hump, Butternut Bend, Leatherwood Loop, Hemlock Grove, Tall Timber Turn, and Maple Tree Mark.

Q: This was around the turn of the century. Are the woods about the same today as they were then or do you notice much change from when you first came?

A: I really don't notice...no change there because as you have observed to me it's ecologically unusual in this region to find woods that tend themselves and therefore contain so little underbrush. The only axes I've heard ring were making kindling out of virgin growth hemlocks that had fallen from age.

Q: Now then, you've given this land to the college or at least the college owns this now. How...

A: Yes, it was given in 1951 by Elihu Root's three children. It comprised this woodland of which we are talking, fields that have been planted to evergreens and pine and then certain farm buildings were attached.

Q: Now on this land there are several places where there are artificial plantings of trees?

A: Yes and maybe we can look at it from that map.

Q: Now these...the plantations that are now grown up pretty well, the tall trees were planted apparently by the Forest Service, the U.S. Forest Service, now this is in 19...

A: Yes, I understand that this was one of the early experiments of 1908.

Q: There are plantations of Norway Spruce and White Pine and other combinations of conifers and hardwoods. Now, were these plantations Mr. Root's ideas of putting them on his land or do you know anything about why they were planted here?

A: No because I came 10 years after this and I simply knew that he was enormously interested in examining them each year. He felt that some of them had been failures, for instance the chestnut, of course, was taken by the blight. The basswood went down and I know the red oak never succeeded. I think he took the word of the forestry department that these were the things to plant and he was not perfectly satisfied when he saw them growing. It was still a try.

Q: Some thing I've never asked you before, I keep forgetting to, how did he get interested in forestry, do you know anything about that?

A: No, I...

Q: He seemed to be interested in almost everything...

A: Yes, almost everything that grew and I suppose if you have land that you can put to trees it's a very practical interesting thing.

Q: Now you and your husband have planted these smaller pine and spruce that grow along the Wood's Road. Now before it goes into the big woods?

A: That was done, un, Edward farmed all that area during the war: peas, bean, which he sold locally. And then afterwards he seemed to think that it was more practical to put it to trees. And that depended, I mean, there were some, it's a very spotty group in there depending entirely upon whether the summer was dry or wet. I remember seeing those men come along and put one boot down and then step right along again.

Q: You didn't plant any of them actually yourself then?

A: No I don't think I did. No I'm quite sure not. Edward may have but I didn't it was in the hands of the men.

Q: Yes, from the state nursery?

A: And from some state nursery and Edward made some arrangement to have them put in by some local people. I cannot remember their names but there were three or four of them, that's all I can remember now.

Q: Well maybe we can talk about plantations some more if we happen to come across them. We talked about the tract itself, but what about the Root Glen itself?

A: The Glen was started in 1850 by Oren Root and his wife Nancy Buttrick. They'd just bought the building that now houses the Arts Center. They worked together on the land which was perfectly bare and without trees except for a group of basswood. One of the group remains, it's a limbless monolith which you see on entrance to the Glen.

Q: Yes, we can see it right through there.

A: You can see it there on the side, on the east side of what we always call in the family the Basin, the depression. Mrs. Root's interest was in the flowers, her husband's in the trees. In these intervening 110 years every tree in the Glen has been planted by hand or has sown itself. Professor Oren Root taught mathematics and other branches of science at the college from 1849 to 1884, moreover he was a collector of facts and fancies. He exchanged mineralogical specimens the world over and he kept local weather records for the federal government. Yet nothing pleased him more than to spend a day in the Paris Hill swamp with Professor North searching for cowslips, waterpitches and spikenhorn.

Q: Who was Professor North?

A: Professor North was a great friend of his, better known here as "Old Greek."

Q: "Old Greek?" Was Oren known as Square Root or was he Cube Root?

A: Well there were two Orens, the one I'm referring to here as Professor Root would be the first Oren and he was called Cube. His son who followed him as Professor of Mathematics also by the name of Oren and the boys called him Square.

Q: Yes, my grandfather told me stories of Square and Cube Root before I'd ever thought of coming here.

A: Well the Professor Root that we are talking of now had an annual salary of \$1,000 and he had four sons to rear. He was content, in fact apparently preferred, to remain on the Hill. When his brother professors went on their sabbatical leaves he'd ask them to bring him back seeds of trees. This accounts for the European Elm which stands just south of the Art Center, Dr. Peters having brought back its seed from Germany.

Q: Who was Dr. Peters?

A: Dr. Peters was a great astronomer. You know where the college observatory was? In front of the Sig hall there, that was his observatory and he...that's where he worked and he took his meals with the Root family at what was then the Root homestead and I suppose one of the famous group of scientists that we had here much to the distress of our Presbyterian ministers who at that time controlled the Board of Trustees. I wonder, would you mind Don if I read you a letter I just laid hands on?

Q: Fine.

A: Because it is from Professor Root on College Hill to his son Elihu in New York and it is dated...

Q: Elihu was in New York?

A: He was in New York studying to be a lawyer.

Q: At Columbia?

A: At NYU...Now the place is lost...

Q: I don't believe I mentioned but we are sitting in the back of the Glen House, south side of the Glen House as you come by the Art Center.

A: Dated April 25, 1870, "To Elihu, from his father Oren Root. I cannot help contrasting our place with the exquisitely finished work of Central Park as we saw it only three days ago. It's to me a great consolation that almost all plants will grow as finely on my simple grounds as on the elegant plots of the park. Granite stairways, marble bridges, sandstone arches I cannot have but the magnolia, rhododendron, calmia, mahonia are as bright with me as in Central Park. We now have quite a good assortment of spring flowers in bloom – the crocus, hepatica, iris, bloodroot and primrose. Our wild plants are springing up rapidly under the warm sun of such a day as this."

Q: Oren was a mathematician as you said, I wonder today if you find mathematicians who are so interested in plants, flowers, growing things?

A: The second Oren was not as interested.

Q: He wasn't?

A: The first Oren as I said had very Catholic tastes and found life enormously interesting.

Q: Although he didn't like to travel apparently.

A: No, I suppose he sat here with contentment the world came to him, what he wished.

Q: A pleasant place to sit. Well, who came next? Who was the next person who was involved in the Glen?

A: The next is the third of the four sons of which I have spoken. The third was Elihu of the class of '64. He remembered sheep being pastured on the knoll and of going there as a little boy to fight mullein stalks with a wooden sword.

Q: Now the knoll, we ought to say where this is. This is...

A: You're a better man on directions than I am, it was due south of where we are sitting in my Glen house.

Q: The knoll is through the Glen, across Root Glen, the stream. I have to walk the path in my mind. If you come past the Art Center and into the garden and then across the stream and up the ravine on the opposite side and instead of going into the pasture, into the field by the pasture you bear left up by the grown-in trail you come to a place where an enormous hemlock has been fallen, has fallen down and its grown up in brambles pretty much, that is the knoll. And there used to be sheep there?

A: Originally there were, at least in Mr. Root's day. And from the time he was the Knight of the Mullein Field many years went by until he had leisure to live and delight in the Glen. A first interest and he was sown here appears to have been tending what his mother had planted. There's a sweet pepper bush that she'd brought from Massachusetts that still flourished beside on the of the hedges. There's a bed of spirea and a bed of lavender hiacynths on the other side of the Basin that Mrs. Root planted and which her son nurtured. But turning again to Professor Root, he had always wanted to own the great hemlock that stood solitary on the top of the knoll. This was one of the famous trees of Clinton. On it were run up the Stars and Stripes as an announcement of was to those living along the Oriskany valley.

Q: What wars would you, how often did the flag go up?

A: Not the ones in my day but I have a vague memory that Mr. Root spoke of the Mexican and the Civil Wars. And those would have been the only ones that he would have known.

Q: Was this flag run up as a warning or just as an announcement?

A: Well I think an announcement. It was in those days the jets were not over your head in a moment. I suppose an announcement.

Q: You don't know who ran the flag up?

A: No I don't at all. It never has occurred to me to think of that before. Maybe there was a committee in the village the way we have volunteer firemen. There may have been three people always waiting to put up that flag. I suppose the access to it would have been from Harding Road. Yes I've shown you this picture that is so interesting taken from the back of the Art Center. The one tree on the horizon is this hemlock.

Q: This is the tree that I'd mentioned had fallen down.

A: Oh it is, oh yes?

Q: Or is it?

A: Yes indeed it must be because that is the biggest one here and...What the background story of it is that Professor Root had always wanted that tree but he never had the money to afford to buy it or rather the particular acre on which the hemlock grew. But later his son could and did though this necessitated a purchase that went through to the banks of the river itself. Later I remember there was a resale to the Harding family of the land between the knoll and the Harding Road. Alas Hurricane Hazel demolished that hemlock. The knoll which had once offered a fine prospect of the entire valley is today a shambles. That's what you referred to as the brambles. It doesn't seem to be known that Elihu Root became so absorbed in the fascination of painting that he had to give it up when starting the study of the law. 50 years brought him recompense. He painted his pictures in the Glen through contrasts of landscaping.

Q: And does he stop painting for 50 years?

A: Yes, he really never painted after he gave it up for the law. I'm attempting to say is that was his palette was the trees and he planted them in different ways. I think it is a rather confused esoteric statement on my part but that's what I was intending to get across. In fact if you look at the causeway where he planted the Russian and the American willows...

Q: The causeway, the cut...

A: The causeway is up; it runs between the present ELS and my nephew's property, Elihu III.

Q: By the old Root barn?

A: Yes, it comes out by the old Root barn and then actually is one of the origins of the brook in Root Glen. I have some photographs of Mr. Root when he was Secretary of State under President Theodore Roosevelt and he is sauntering the Glen with walking stick and panama hat. The terrain is smooth lawn and the flower beds are meticulously tended.

Q: Well who was the next person?

A: Well, then you come to my husband Edward, class of '05, who inherited the Glen on his father's death in 1937. following the change in taste and eye in the generations Edward's was for perfection of the individual flower and for introduction of color to the landscape. The satisfaction in the first category he imported daffodil bulbs from Britain between the wars. This was done on a research arrangement with the U.S. government.

Q: Could you say more about that, I don't quite understand?

A: Well he...there was an embargo at that time on the importation of daffodil bulbs which had been laid down through the powers of the daffodil growers lobby. The

American daffodil growers thought this was a very fine time to say that the daffodil fly was in Europe and that there were none here so we must keep our land pure. Actually of course they did not want the Dutch growers and other European firms to get started after the war in making money here. The truth of it was the U.S.A. was full of the daffodil fly but you had to go through getting connected and the first few years when we got the bulbs in we had to boil them to enormous heat to be sure that they were not going to bring in any of the plague here. And I recollect that for the first 7 years Edward had to grow his plants, his daffodil plants, behind very fine netting. He had frames over in what is now the vegetable garden and whenever the garden club would come to visit I remember well the pictures of them all getting down on their knees in their best daffodil dresses to peer into these almost animal cages in which Edward had to keep them. After 7 years he was released and he could give away some of his bulbs or move them to a different section of the place because but until the 7 years the inspectors came 2 or 3 times a summer and looked over and see whether the bulbs were infected or what. Edward was enormously interested in measuring the length of the petal, the width across the flower, the height of the stem, dates of flowering and he kept such records for the many varieties I suppose, yes I'll look it up, I can't be definite but he must have had 75 varieties. And for over 20 years he did this itemization.

Q: Yes I bought a book of his that was in one of the book auctions, a book of genetics. Was he also interested in genetic research or...

A: No I think he was interested in getting the perfect flower more than anything. It's just that he and the rest of the Roots I have known couldn't possibly touch lightly on the subject, they had to know it from the bottom up. And this of course became an enormous venture to him, the matter of the daffodil. But I would say that the original aim was to produce, to see produced a perfect, the most perfect flower possible. And anyway I now have this daffodil collection of his naturalized in the Glen. I think it needs, I must give it far more attention this summer because of course as he had it they were always in beds very carefully weeded and unfortunately I have let the grass get around the bulbs down here in the Glen. This year I'm disappointed to find how much smaller the flowers have grown. Now Edward took them up, took up the bulbs every 3rd summer, say early July and then he toasted them and roasted them so to speak in the heat of what is now my Glen house and what was then his studio. They got completely dried out, they got rested and then he would them, plant them back, as I recollect, in September, late September. And this time I will be doing that next summer to most of these daffodils. In fact I had best start on it this year because I certainly think they need to be rested from the grass. Anything more that I could say on the daffodils?

Q: Do you know how he happened to get interested in the daffodils?

A: He found them very beautiful, he found the perfection of the bloom very great. I find that it interests our son too. I find it interests a good..it seems to be an appealing flower to men as certainly primroses are to women. Of course it is an early flower here. You've gone through a long winter, you think in terms immediately of what comes up first and I think it's especially precious to you. I was always interested...it's the way I was

interested in my primroses. I have some there in the Basin, they come from Kashmir and the Himalayas. They grow here...they blossom here when the snow is on the ground. Shall we move on to the other thing that interested him, which was hybridizing iris?

Q: Certainly.

A: he was always after a true blue or a true red flower. Many of them have a purplish hue which he did not tolerate. The reds he named after local Indian chieftains of Kirkland's time. The blues he christened after favorite heroines in fiction, past and present.

Q: What were some of the...

A: Well those of you who are interested can puzzle these out for yourselves by looking at the group of iris which is now planted, which is now on the lawn just south and west of the Art Center. Each one has its name alongside and it's rather a test on one's literary background or Indian lore.

Q: Oh, he used Indian...

A: He used Indian names too, not only the chieftains but Oriskany names about here and of this locality.

Q: How would he know the names of the Indian chieftains? Had he studied them?

A: Well again we go back to grandfather Root the Professor Oren. He had been brought up at Vernon.

Q: Vernon, N.Y.?

A: Vernon, N.Y. where his father had come over from New England with a surveying team. You must remember that Vernon is a place which actually now is just at the corner, the Root place was at the corner of the entrance to Vernon Downs. The Indians were all around still and as a little boy this Oren, the first Oren, said they were always scared as children because there were so many wild dogs who would accompany the Indians as they rode...

Q: What would be the date?

A: Oren, the first Oren, as I can remember was born in 1804. He was born in Vernon in 1803, died in Clinton 1884.

Q: And it was his father who was the surveyor?

A: His father was the surveyor and Oren learned a good deal of Indian when he was growing up. He made himself a vocabulary which I've never happened to find or see. So

that he was able when we had an occasion here in the campus in the 70's Oren Root was then able to talk to the representative, the Oneida representative who came over. It was the time when Skenandowa's bones were lifted and buried in, under the same monument as those of Samuel Kirkland.

Q: He would interpret for the Indians?

A: He would interpret then and we had a governor, we had a Chinese ambassador and this language came back to him and apparently always interested him.

Q: Would this be the Oneida dialect?

A: I suppose so; I would think so.

Q: And he actually learned this as a child?

A: He learned it as a child. And whether he made himself that vocabulary, that book I've always hoped I'd...that my hands would fall on it. Whether he made it at that time or later on in life I don't know. All I do remember is that at the very, very end of his life he felt his mind was failing and in order to test it he would give this vocabulary to his wife and she would ask him to, she would try and find out whether he remembered this or that. I have here Morgan's book, Lewis Morgan's book which I think is called, *The Conspiracy of the Iroquois* and that is full of notes by Oren Root and I found that Edward became very much interested, Edward found it a very euphonius language. He loved the sound.

Q: Edward learned it too?

A: Well he picked up a few...it was really I think in order to find names for his redskinned iris and I will sometime...I'm sorry I didn't think to get out the list because I have the lists of the iris and I would say about a quarter of them have Indian names gotten either from Morgan or...I suppose it would be entirely from Morgan. You'll find Morgan, Morgan's book is spoken of a great deal by Edmund Wilson in his new book on the Indians. He was the great, Morgan was the greatest Indian authority in New York State in the 50's I think. Yes, you had a question about Oren?

Q: He and Oren knew each other then or did they not?

A: You mean my husband knew his grandfather?

Q: No, Oren and uh...?

A: And Morgan? I don't know about that. I think Morgan was in Rochester in his later years but I never heard of their meeting. No, Professor Root would get the authoritative book on a subject which interested him and he'd make many annotations in it, which of course are enormously interesting to look at in these days. Several histories of this

locality he'd...Pomeroy Jones was a cousin, an older cousin Mr. Root thought he was the self, great fool that he hadn't asked him questions when he was a young boy but of course at that time you don't care. Anything more on the Indians? I can only wish we...

Q: This is very interesting it's not...I'm sure he was one of the few people who'd spoken Oneida at that time. Certainly there were much fewer people now who do.

A: I suppose there's a reservation, Oneida reservation, that's carried on. The only reservation I have ever been to is the Onondoga. A long while past I saw an Indian on the streets of Clinton, he had the most beautiful big baskets and I bought a large one and gave it to Edward for a scrap basket which pleased him because he could sit one end of the room, ball up the paper that he'd just written on and then throw it across and when that wore out I thought it would be very simple to (replace it). I knew it had come from the Onondoga reservation and having talked to the man in the village of Clinton and so I thought I'd go over. I was sure to get another. Well it was a rather dreary place, no one was doing baskets. They looked like a pretty forlorn lot and that's the only visit I've ever made to the reservation. Do you know if there is an Oneida reservation around here?

Q: I don't know. I don't believe there is. The only one I know around here is the Onondoga. I know that some of the Iroquois languages are still spoken. Well, where were we about the Glen?

A: Well we were then on the other thing I was trying to tell you. We've done the daffodils this was all in Edward's attempt to interest in the perfect flower.

Q: Let me get this straight. When would he have uh...This was between the Second and First World Wars?

A: Yes, the daffodils were started quite early in our life here. I should think about 1925.

Q: Was Dr. Saunders here at this time?

A: Oh yes, Dr. Saunders was the one who started everything for us. You see his interest in hybridizing peonies was pretty thrilling to observe and Edward took to hybridizing his iris because of that. I did hybridizing, some hybridizing of primula. He was the, Percy Saunders was the presiding genius here for flowers, flowers, starts, beauty, or all manner of things. The other interest that I think Edward particularly showed was, as I say, introducing color in the Glen. Now you will find in the bottom of the Basin there that he put a native yellow and blue iris in. You see his father had had it all green, varieties of green, Edward put the color in there. I added my Japanese primroses, the pink ones that are just coming into bloom today and they will be followed in another few weeks by a Chinese group which is, the Chinese group is a cross between a bright purple, rather ugly color, and a saffron, the result is all varieties of lavender, yellows, ruby red and I must say I find it a very beautiful sight down there, this tapestry of color for the next few weeks. The only other thing that I'm doing in adding the color is putting more azaleas up along the hedges. There have been azaleas on this place from the beginning. I think

Professor Root planted one yellow one which is now just behind the little gazebo which you and I are looking at, at the south side of my Glen house here and there's a yellow azalea his son Elihu put in and I have added a little bit to a few of them. I've put in particularly this last autumn I put in quite a group around the Art Center. Now I'm surprised that you haven't asked me the myrtle myth because that seems to be of great interest to people. I felt sure that you would come to that.

Q: I haven't heard of the myrtle myth.

A: Well, I call it that. All I can...

Q: The myrtle is this low green ground cover you have here?

A: Yes, the periwinkle stars as they are blue. And as I get the story, I got the story, there were two ugly stone vases containing myrtle which stood on the path up to the knoll. And during the winter of 1884 one of the vases blew over. The myrtle got a running and it's kept on ever since. Certainly I'd be the last one to stop it because only such ground cover makes it possible to protect my acreage.

Q: It certainly gives an almost magical feeling to walk down through there and then when you come out of the myrtle and into the ordinary woods it's like coming back into the real world almost.

A: I particularly love the movement to let my eye follow, the movement of the land under the myrtle. In fact I manicure it so often that Edward used to teasingly accuse me of trying to make the Glen look like a park. You see I happen to feel that one of the mistakes that people make about gardening is that they destroy the natural growth and they try and put everything into borders and beds. My original idea here was to first learn what grew happily in the woodland, in the wild garden. Well, the Roots said that for 2 generations before us had transplanted many things and then I wanted to add what you might call suitable companions or in Darwin's term, form an association of plants, for instance, our two native trillium, are the white brand of floral and the dark red which I'm sure you're familiar with, particularly over in the far woods where there is such an April griff.

Q: They are native over there, they haven't been planted over there?

A: No, they're native, we moved them around a good deal. There's one...

Q: You and Edward?

A: Yes, there was one solid block of them in our first years here and each year we'd move a few. I think that...

Q: When would that be, what year?

A: That would have been in the 20's, from 1920 to 1925. Now of course I've begun to move them to the front of my Glen house. I have moved them into the Basin of the Glen, that was Edward's idea and they take over so readily you feel as if they'd always been there. It's an, I was interested to discover that there were 15 or 16 other kinds of trillium growing along our east coast I suppose from Maine to Florida. I'd like to do the same with a violet and the daphne families. I tried twice to see if the newcomer would be interested to settle. Nature does lots of kind things for it's free though it's only fair we never can force her hand.

Q: Several years ago, 2 years ago perhaps, I think you said to me that Edward had planted some beech trees over in the big wood lot over in there. Is that...?

A: Beech?

Q: Perhaps I'm mistaken.

A: A group of hickories, you wouldn't mean the group of hickories near the... Oh, I know where you mean, yes. That was over on the far entrance to the woods. Down a slope where we used to ski, is that where I would have referred to?

Q: Perhaps.

A: Yes, I think, yes you're quite right I had forgotten that. Yes, he was very interested in planting trees but always believed in planting the acorn because that's the way you get a straight bowl and I remember how much Tom Rudd who was then Professor of the College, Controller of the College, laughed at him and said, "Well you must be a patient man." Edward said, "Well if you have the opportunity why not plant a tree that is going to be as nearly perfect in shape as possible and at least you can be assured of getting a straight stem by planting the acorn which you cannot do if you go off and pick up a seedling in the woods that's already met with vicissitudes and twisted this way and that." I find it very fascinating you know in a place like the Glen we plant things in the ground and then forget all about them, then some year they come back to visit you. You think we've pretty well covered the matter of the planting of the Glen.

Q: Let's see I... You still own the Glen, don't you own this property, not the college?

A: Yes, the Root glen is the heartland you might call of the 14 acres that I own running south from the state road to the top of the knoll. As guardian pro temp I want the Glen to be enjoyed on the hill. There were some very worrisome days for us after the last was a returned generation was trigger happy. Shots whistled all around us, bridges across the brook were broken for the sheer fun of jumping hard, and the flowers were picked by the armful and plants were bodily removed from under our very windows. Americans are a squatter race and only a few of us have respect for private property. Now, my plants had always been labeled with individual markers and during the time of, we will refer to as our late troubles, I decided for my own information to add on the back of the labels the country or origin of each plant. Quite accidentally this turned the trick. Suddenly it was

realized that I didn't have a garden of local weeds. Since then the plants have suffered no degradations. For many a long year I've been told that so and so's mother or grandmother would love to walk through the Glen, yet this spring I find many a father taking photographs there. I've seen an occasional undergraduate on his knees before the flowers with a paintbrush or pencil or magnifying glass in hand. I wonder, to you think that proximity to the Art Center maybe responsible for this change? I don't see why not. Since the pictures, records and furniture inside the house are not only enjoyed but are given such solicitous care. Well, whatever the reason the results delight me. It raises my hopes that an oasis against the encroachment of jeeps, landing fields and mushroom houses may be preserved in the Glen for members of our College Hill community. Could it make a difference to you Don if the Glen stayed as it is when you returned to your 25th anniversary?

Q: I enjoy it as it is now.

A: So you'd be glad to see it so remain.