

Virginia Houston/TC1995.0002
Mad River Valley Project/VFC1991.0004

VH Virginia Houston
JB Jane Beck
Place Boston, MA
Date 02/14/1995

VH Okay.

JB Okay.

MS People walk by.

JB We went to Bob Stiller's who has Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and he would get something, we were on a plane, and you know we had to do it over about six different times.

VH That's an exciting plant, isn't it?

MS Okay.

JB Yeah. Okay, well why don't we start a little bit about your background, and than how you came to farm land.

VH Well I grew up in Boston and as a poor city kid, I had dreams of trees and horses and a, and farm life. Something the opposite of what I was exposed to. And a, do you? Do you? [1.16]

JB Yeah.

VH How much do you want me to get into? Yeah.

JB Well, let's do, let's do the first part, because I think that's fascinating in how how you you know you had paper route or whatever you, what you did and.

VH Okay. [1.27]

JB Yeah that's good.

VH All right. Well I grew up dreaming about trees, and a horses and so forth and a, as I said I was a really poor city kid, and I started working from the time I was in the third grade working, doing errands and running errands and a baby sitting and so forth.

[1.51] And a, by the time I graduated from high school I had saved ten thousand dollars. However during that time I also learned, I learned the value of, of the dollar but I also learned that it was important to give back, because my mother would a, often say to me, well you can't charge so and so because they can't afford it. So it was a very strong lesson early on. [2.20] As you know I felt this was a, so eventually it became part of my life. And a, when I was in my, after I graduated from high school I

went to work for the president of Maryland Cup Corporation which was Sweetheart paper, Sweetheart straws, and a he had a number of brokers calling him, stock brokers, and I was working for him during the day, and I was working at night in Harvard Square in an antique shop, and continuing to save my money. And a, after about a year I decided well I'll open an account myself and I started trading, and over time turned that ten thousand dollars into a few million. And I eventually went into business for myself. I had a paper store in Danvers, Massachusetts and I also opened an art gallery on Newbury Street in Boston because I always a painted and loved art. And art sort of opens your eyes to nature. And so that's sort of a part of my life enjoying and going back to my childhood enjoying trees and, and a just natural beauty. And a, you know my life sort of went on and a eventually I became stock broker, because E.F. Hutton pursued me, and a they were following my stock trades. And a as I continued in the market even thought I was in different businesses. And a, one of my clients called me up one day and they were checking their

account. And a, after we finished business they said to me, or I said to them, have you been riding lately?

Cause I knew they had horses and a, so forth and I had, I had a recently broken up with a fellow who had a farm and I had fallen in love with the farmlife but not in love with the gentleman. [4.25] Ha! So a, anyway they said yes they had been riding and the farm they usually ride through, was being sold. And they were hoping that a developer didn't buy it. So I said "well what are you doing for the weekend? Do you feel like company?" And a, I drove up and we saddled up the horses on Saturday and we rode out behind Palmer hill road and came out on this wonderful property and I was in love immediately. And we rode up to the old farmhouse and I introduced myself to Ken Austin and who was the owner of the property, it was the old Long farm originally. [5.08] And a, he said the, the land was under contract and I gave him my card and I said, "well if it should fall through give me a call and I'll buy it from you." And actually I never expected to hear from him again, but two weeks later he called me. And a, so I sent him a check and, and we shortly

there after you know made, you know purchased the property.

JB Would you say, you know I purchased the property in Waitsfield, Vermont. Or, just so you get Waitsfield, Vermont in there. [5.57] VHOokay. In 19, what was it? A 87, 19, it was the year of the crash. 1987. In 1987 I purchased this wonderful property in Waitsfield, Vermont which is, you know, sort of, it also included Scragg Mountain. It goes into the Northfield, it goes across the Northfield range, and into Northfield as well. That a, although the original property was 350 acres, so it didn't, it didn't go up and over the mountain but I since purchased after I found that I had water on the property I needed to purchase the land above me to protect the, the water and the aquafir. So I ended up purchasing a few years later from Ward Lumber, the additional it's almost two thousand acres in total which includes the top of Scragg mountain, [7.05] and up and over the top of Scragg mountain and across, about three miles across the Northfield ridge, and actually a couple hundred acres into Northfield.

Anyway I purchased the original property in the summer of 87, I think it was August. And in October two days before the market crashed, I was riding, I was trying out a horse on the property and I fell and I broke my back. And a, actually I had to get back on the horse to get out of the woods. And a, I went off to a, the hospital and sure enough you know I broke my back and a I was supposed to stay put but I knew the market was gonna come down on Monday unless the Fed eased. So I had my friend drive me to Boston, we put a mattress in the back of my Jeep and I drove to Boston and shuffled into work the next day and to take care of my clients.

[8.04] And a, so it was a pretty rough period of time for me and the market was difficult for a long time and, and my back was a, you know it took a long time to heal.

MS _____ . (Too soft to hear)

JB Like have it, have it slurp. Start I guess with, you had a difficult time.

VH That period was a very difficult time because the markets were very erratic and a, and I was, I was in tremendous back pain, and couldn't drive because the doctor wouldn't allow me to drive, I could actually feel every bounce. So it was time to work and go home and I'd go home at night and lay on my back and you know I'd, I would a think about, just life or whatever and some where along the line I started thinking that I had, or dreaming one or the other, that I had a lot of water on my property in Waitsfield. And you know I don't remember exactly whether it was a dream or a wish or just rambling thoughts. But a, I've always had a bigger wish, and a bigger dream that a. (pause)

[9.43] I just a you know the feeling kept getting stronger that I had water and I, I just have always, I just felt, it started at that time. But a, along with that sort of dream my bigger dream has always been to effect children in a positive way, particularly poor

children. [10.12] Because most, you know there are a lot of charities for children with cancer or children with and we're all very involved, I'm very involved with children, that are a, being abused. My best friend opened a center for abused children, and I helped fund it along with her husband initially and a, over the years, so I've been very, I really believe that children are our future, and we have to start paying attention to them. [10.44] But I'm also concerned about children who just happen to be poor and a, don't have the opportunity to maybe go to the camp of their choice or a camp at all or, in the summertime or may need a computer for school or they don't have a bike. Whatever it is I, I would like to sort of get involved in the community, and sort of from the grassroots up start to effect children's lives in a positive way. So my feeling was that maybe there might be water on my property and this would be a way to make my bigger dream come true. If I could get a company going and a, be able to set up a foundation to a, to help, to get involved with children's lives. [11.46] And a, so when I got

better, I started to go back to Vermont and I started to tell my friends that what I felt was on the property, and they thought oh well you know Ginny this is really silly. You know there's no water there, and you're dreaming. And a, I said, "Yes but I you know the, every time I come up, the feeling gets stronger instead of going away." I mean now I'm healthy again, and a, you know I've gone on with my life and things are you know, I'm skiing again, I'm horseback riding again, and I should forget about this because it's, it's really wishing, or dreaming. [12.28] And so but instead it got much worse for me. So we tried to get a, dowser over to the property, but for whatever reason he never showed up and a, so finally they my friends decided well we'll try to get him. And he still never showed up. So, I researched and found out who the best hydro gel was in the state was and that, that was Wagner _____ and I approached them and I asked them what, what was necessary for them, you know could they look at my property and what, what was the process to have them do some research. And, [13.06] they gave me seven outline and it looked to me

like it was all going to be done in increments, so I said, "you know, well you know this is either woman's intuition. Do I need to stop? (short pause) [13.23]

This is either woman's intuition or a dream that I'm wishing. And a, so at any point if you think that this is not a reality could we just stop the project?

And you know could you work with me, and I certainly can, can except that this is, this idea is not working. And they said, "yes, we'll be happy to work with you." Well they went over to the property and they started whatever, whatever they do, and after a period of time they called me up and they said, "we're very conservative house but we want you to know we're very excited." [14.03] And we don't like to tell you that because you never know. And so I said "well does that mean that I have water on the property?" And they said, "well we don't know. We, you don't know until you actually drill." So I said, "well continue your process and a we'll see how it goes." So, they continued on however long it took and a, they called me up one day, Ken Bannister called me up and he said, "we've located where we feel the primary location is."

And I said to him," well you go down the old logging road, and you go through the gate, and continue up the logging road, you go over Pine Brook, and go up the hill, and there's a ridge there, and there's actually an old car down there, is that where you're talking about?" And he said, I was in Boston, he was in Vermont and, you could just hear the pause, and he said, "he almost passed out." I mean it was just incredible. That I know exactly where the location was and that was, that is the primary location." So we a, hired Minosh to drill, and a, they broke the equipment, they would put in that preliminary bore hole on the way to the primary source and even at the preliminary location, they broke the drill. And we've actually never been able to cap it properly. [15.20]

And than we went to the primary and we, and they drilled a few other locations and the purpose of that I think I did four bore holes in total, the purpose of that was to test how large the source was and a, check the flow and all that kind of thing. Anyway it turns out that it's the largest bedrock aquafir in the Northeast. It's the largest source of spring water in

the entire Northeast. It, they conservatively estimate the flow to be fifteen hundred gallons a minute. And Ken actually lived on the property for about a year to do further testing and particularly test the recharge which is the new water coming in, and that can be snow or rain, it actually can just be moisture because there's a cloud cover that goes across that range, and it's there every morning, and the trees actually pull the moisture from the, from the clouds. [16.21] And that was why it was important for me to buy the additional land to make sure that first of all they trees weren't clear cut, and I did change, it is in forest management and I did change the management from clear cut to selective cutting. So they think the, they think the actual recharge and flow it's about three thousand gallons a minute. But to do, to find out exactly we'd have to put in much bigger bore holes, we put in six inch bore holes and it's not necessary because you would never use that amount of water. I mean this, this a, this flow, this could supply the entire United States. And as long as you withdraw below, you know just below the

recharge, than that, that a, source could go on forever. So you're talking about generations and generations. We recently just found out and again this was my intuition, and I, Ken Bannister thinks I'm a witch because I kept telling him I, I felt that this was glacier water. And I felt this because, the water is incredibly pure, and the purer the water, the older the old component is, so there's no component and new water coming in. And of course the older the water the less a, pollutants there were, you know that existed at that time. So we recently sent, there's a new test available at the University of Waterloo in Canada, and a, and at one time they used to have to come down and actually visit on sight but we sent samples to Canada, and the testing is quite extensive.

And a, the water, the old component does go back over ten thousand years to the last glacier age. So, so we know that the water has been there, under my property like it's just like the valley of the whale, for over ten thousand years. [18.31] The bore holes now in the spring in particular they break the caps, so I actually have to keep the caps open all winter, and I

usually try to close them up in the summertime although they, there's so much pressure that sometimes they break. We did do further testing because we, you know the state has very strict controls over, that you can't effect your neighbor and that sort of thing so we had to test all the neighboring wells to make sure that we weren't effecting their supply of water and so forth. And it is, no obviously no effect because a, the flow is just so great, and that was one of the reasons again why we put in a number of bore holes and we would run, we would run them full out, you know we would, we would heat the hydro gel just would I think he pumped I don't know exactly but you don't have to pump I mean it just pours out at, a six inch pipe at six hundred gallons a minute. So he went around and he tested everybody's well and actually even the people across the street from me had a different component makeup of water. So they're not necessarily a, they don't necessarily have the same water source and but again we tested the flow of all of them.

[19.56] And a, so I have all my state licenses and approvals so. Anyway once we did that, we a, I

proceeded in the town of Waitsfield to apply to the planning board, because I wanted to build a bottling plant in the town, I could employ easily 50 people, probably a full blown bottling plant could employ probably 70 even a hundred people. And I put the bottling plant in the industrial zone, and I explained to the town fathers that I wanted to set up a foundation and to give back particularly for children, but I also over time and, and as I went through this process, the old timers in the town, the old Vermonters really rallied behind me to support me in this process. And I've been so inspired by them because [20.55] they would come to every single meeting and you know sometimes they weren't well, and it took a lot of time. And so I really want also the foundation to include seniors and to protect their quality of life so that is very important to me.

[21.20] The original person to come forward with was Edgar Trombley, and he, the amount of work he's done is just incredible, I mean I, you know how do you ever thank somebody for that. And Ed Eurich came on board as well as Sterling Livingston, and Jack Larrow, and

Hap Gaylord, and all these guys just showed up to all these meetings. Sterling's last words to me, you know he died last year, his last words to me were I just want to see this come to fruition. And I hope I live long enough. And he's, a he's now shining down on us and a, helping us with the man upstairs, I really believe. [22.05]

JB Why do you think they are so supportive?

_____ something too about you know kind of coming in from outside, maybe you could frame it in, even though I'm new in town they you know, property rights or whatever you choose to say.

[22.26]

VH You know I, I came to Vermont in 89, and I'm a new person in town, and it takes time for people to get to know you. And a, but you know the people in the community have sort of watched me and some of them have really gotten to know me well, and they really started with meetings but you know I've since a, made some really good friends and the old timers in

particular I think accepted me because they, they saw was I was all about, and they believe in, they really believe in property rights. And this particular project also it sort of opens up, how do I want to say? This particular project you have to preserve land, you can't build on the property, you can't have a subdivision or you will have polluted water. You can't have a massive road system, you, you really have to preserve the, the natural habitat and the natural land. But yet it also offers you know employment and it sort of, I think they recognize that you're going to have some change, but change with responsibility is positive change. It's positive change, because every thing does change. But particularly I think they've been supportive because this is a property rights issue. And as long as you're not negatively effecting your neighbor, as Sterling said, "this is what we fought for in the various wars." And, that's why he just wanted to see it come to fruition. So it's sort of a, hits all the targets you know it a, Vermonters in general believe in property rights, and they fight for, they fight for that, they fight for individuals

who are striving to preserve their rights. And at the same time preserve property. [24.54] So and they could see that you know Waitsfield in particular is pretty much dependent on, on the ski industry, so this year for instance I understand Sugarbush before we go snow, had to lay off two hundred people, and in the summertime most people are laid off, I mean some are full time and some are out of work in the summertime and they're looking for part time situations and pretty much service types of jobs. Painters, plumbers, that type of thing. This industry, the water industry it would offer full time employment, and I think you need more than one industry in a town in particularly when you have an industry that is dependent on the weather, because even if, if you can make snow if you, if you're not, if you don't have natural snow, people from New York or Boston aren't, you know sort of a, in the mood. [26.00] And a, so it does effect everyone, if effects the inns it effect the restaurants, it effects the a, you know the clothing stores, the supermarkets, gas stations, every one. So I think it's important to be diversified in a

town, but again, you know I agree with the town that they need to look at an industry and make a responsible decision for the environment and for the people in the community. And I really believe that this business I mean you know the state regulates the flow, they approved, I only asked for six hundred gallons a minute, not the 1500 that my hydro geologist conservatively said that absolutely wouldn't effect anyone. That actually you know things looked higher. And I've gotten all the state, all the state standards and a, I was approved. So a, here you preserve almost two thousand acres and you can employ 50 to a hundred people in a town with full time employment, with good jobs, you know you're talking about office workers, you're talking about executives, you're talking about factory workers, you're talking about truckers, you're talking about all the service businesses that go along with it. And that, that's adds a tax base to the town, it also sort of, it throws out again, you know to all the other industries. Because people are gonna be buying groceries if they can afford to buy groceries, they're

going to be buying clothing, you know they're gonna be using gas stations and that type of thing, so a, you know aside from the fact that we want to set up a percentage of profits to go into this foundation, that you know, it's my ultimate goal. It's a real solid type of business.

JB So what is the problem, what is preventing this from happening? [28.00]

VH Well as I said, I applied to the planning board and it took a year to go through that process. And they did approve me for six trucks a day, and sent in, and than the next step was to apply, to apply to the board of adjustment, which I did do, and a, the board decided to get a legal opinion and they were concerned that it was, that this use was not a use in the town. So they hired John Hanson from Rutland and he studied the ordinance to a determine whether it was a use by right or whether it under property rights or whether it was a conditional use. [28.44] And I must say he was a very honorable gentleman, because he sort of, once he

was given this job he would not take personal testimony from anyone including a town or from me or my hydro geologist or any one but you could submit any information in writing. And you know we submit, we sent him all our data and so forth but the real issue was he needed to look into the ordinance in Waitsfield. And several months went by and he took quite a long time in his studies and he came back and he decided that his legal opinion was that this was a use by right, under the definition of agriculture in the town. And I guess the ordinance expanded on agriculture and actually suggested that the town fathers and the community be creative in their endeavors of agriculture. So we were really thrilled at this and a, you know I also felt this was a, this is an agricultural issue because once you know that you have water, there are certain things that you have to do to preserve that water, and there are things that you shouldn't do. So that you really have a fiduciary obligation particularly a source of this magnitude. You can't a, as I say you can't subdivide, you have to have certain vegetation for instance you

know the, the trees and the, and the vegetation are important. How you farm is important. [30.16] Whether you obviously you can't use pesticides, you really have to do conservation farming, versus, versus hill farming. So you know you really have to actively do certain things, and you have to a, not, just not do certain things. And a, anyway the board of adjustment decided to ignore John Houston's legal opinion, and denied my a use. So I have, I had no recourse other than to appeal that in the courts and since John Houston's legal opinion was an agricultural that this was an agricultural use even the town of Waitsfield that's what we went through the court appealing at. Appealing the board of adjustments denial of that. And we lost, we lost in the lower court and again we lost in the lost Vermont Supreme Court. So we don't, you know we, at this moment I can't, I can't open business and I can't withdraw water other then for my own use on the property.

JB What was the ruling of the Supreme Court?

VH The ruling, let's see if I can, the ruling of the Supreme Court if I remember it correctly the

department of agriculture, as yet has not acknowledged water as an agricultural product. The Vermont Department of Agriculture has not acknowledged water as an agricultural product, however other states are regulated by the department of agriculture. So that there are a number of states across the United States that do regulate water under agriculture. The Vermont Department of Agriculture has given water a separate seal, and there's been some debate about it. About recognizing water as an agricultural product. And I hope, I'm really hoping at some point that it is recognized because I really believe that unless it is recognized as an agriculture product, that the face of Vermont will change because farming is, is always changing and evolving. And people, it's hard enough to make a living from your property, and farming always has to sort of be creative. [32.50] In order to exist and always has been, it's been a, it's been sort of a difficult road to go. And what's happening is people are subdividing their properties because they can't continue to make a living.

JB So do you look at this really as a set back or do you

look at it as knocking our your dreams or I guess, and
what does that mean? [33.20] As much as you can
_____.

VH I look at this ruling as I went down this road and I
didn't get there by going down this road. And my
training in life has always been if this road doesn't
work, I need to retrace my steps, come back down that
road and now try this other road. So I don't give up,
and I don't go away. And that's probably why the old
timers like me so much. Because I may not have born a
Vermonter but I think we're cut of the same class.
And that road didn't work, but maybe the next road
will.

JB _____.

VH Ha! Ha! Ha!

JB _____ . [34.16]

MS Anyway. Okay.

JB Okay.

VH What's the question? Ha! Ha!

JB _____.

VH Yes.

MS What I want to do is.

VH Okay. What, what my dream is to do with this, this wonderful water, is to build a bottling plant in an industrial zone and actually I have all of the, the financial support available to me, and a, we want to build a bottling plant, and bottle spring water under the name of Virgin Vermont, and a, supply this water to starting small and growing over time and a, build a company. We're also talking about a, natural sodas. And, we have to think of a name for that. We're a socially responsibly company and want to give back to the community. I've got people that are on our management team that are Vermonters that are interested in, in coming on board with various expertise, because obviously I can't do every thing myself. But a, I have a wonderful chemist who, whose wife is originally a Vermonter, and he wants to, they want to settle in the community. And come home and a, his family was in the soda business for a hundred years or so. So that a, he brings wonderful recipes for natural sodas. But this spring water itself is a, you know as I said this is, you know our selling point

is that it's really the best water available and it's, it's real class water, it can compete with any of the waters out there. A number of the large water companies have actually looked at this water and again they can't believe the purity. So a, we want to build a responsible company. I don't know if that was said to well. Yeah. Oh, oh, oh. [36.31] I also really believe that a, this isn't just a gift for me, this is a gift for all Vermonters and we want to do a public offering. A Vermont offering initially so that anyone interested in being part of this can buy the stock, and eventually do a public offering. And for instance if, if you buy a thousands shares of Ben and Jerry's stock, when it went public, on the Vermont offering, it's worth about fifth thousand dollars today. So hopefully our stock will do as well. [37.07]

JB Well _____.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW