

“Green Mountain Chronicles”
Oral History Transcriptions, 1981-1989 (bulk: 1987-1988)
MSA 199 & 200

Introduction

This transcription is one of approximately 42 transcriptions of interviews with individuals conducted primarily in 1987 and 1988 in preparation for a radio program sponsored by the Vermont Historical Society entitled “Green Mountain Chronicles.”

Scope and Content

The transcriptions in this collection represent interviews of approximately 42 individuals conducted primarily in 1987 and 1988 by Mark Greenberg, Mary Kasamatsu, Eleanor Ott, and Tom Davis in preparation for a radio series entitled “Green Mountain Chronicles.” The series of 52 five-minute programs was broadcast by commercial and public radio stations throughout the state in late 1988 and early 1989. The earliest interview in the collection was conducted in 1981; the latest was in 1989.

The interviewers spoke with well known Vermonters such as Governors Philip Hoff, Deane Davis, and Madeleine Kunin; lesser known personalities such as Catherine Robbins Clifford, one of the first women to hike the entire length of the Long Trail; and historians such as Weston Cate. The following inventory of the collection highlights the major theme(s) of each interview. The following list of program tapes gives the title of each radio program.

The goal of the radio series was to tell the history of Vermont in the twentieth century using archival sound recordings and recent interviews. The project was undertaken by the VHS in celebration of its 150th anniversary in 1988 and was funded by a \$14,000 grant from the Vermont Council on the Humanities and Public Issues with additional support from New England Telephone Company.

MSA 199, Folder 0 contains background information on the project. The VHS website at www.vermonthistory.org/gmchronicles contains a list of the Green Mountain Chronicles radio broadcasts and audio files of those broadcasts.

Elizabeth Ballard
January 5, 1989

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG And the date, it's January 5, 1989 in Norwich, Vermont. I'm speaking with Mrs. Elizabeth Ballard for the Vermont Historical Society, Green Mountain Chronicle Series.

EB It's January 6th.

MG Oh, it's January 6th okay. Thank you for correcting me. Well why don't we just pick up right where you were talking and tell me about your memory of the, of your mother's collecting the ballads, how it came about, why they picked her, just exactly what you were telling me.

EB Well, she was a musician who had written some poetry and they had some funds from, might have been the, the Carnegie Corporation, I'm not sure about that to collect some ballads during the summer of, oh dear, what was it, it's probably somewhere in, any way it was to collect some ballads during a summer and she had just scratched the surface. They had told her they were, that they didn't expect her to find any in Vermont, but she found she had just scratched the surface and there were many more to be discovered. She had the help of Mr. Phillips Barry of Groton, Massachusetts and he showed her what to look for and that they had been cataloged by Frances Child, the Border Ballads had. They had been cataloged so that you would say you had found Charles Ballad #1, Charles Ballard #2, which she followed. And Frances Henry Child, he was I believe still teaching a little bit of Shakespeare when I was at Radcliff teaching Shakespeare. No, that was Kitty.

MG Uh huh. Why did they ask your mother?

EB Well because she was a musician who had written some poetry.

MG What was her, did she play an instrument? Did she...

EB Oh yes. She played piano.

MG Was she a composer or?

EB No, I don't think so.

MG So as a musician, she was a pianist?

EB Yes, that's all.

MG I see. And she wrote poetry?

EB Yes.

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MG What was her poetry like?

EB Well, a lot of it was, was read at her funeral which I was not at because I was in Europe at the time. But she had a group that was read called, oh dear. You really ought to talk with my brother.

MG Okay.

EB Because he, he, I don't know, where would he be right now?

MG What is his name?

EB James Flanders, James H. Flanders. And sometimes he's up here in Springfield, Vermont and I don't think he's sold his house in Boston yet.

MG So they came, they asked your mother because she was a musician and a poet and what, how did she, do you remember what her response was, what she thought of all this?

EB Well she was quite flabbergasted, but willing to take it on. And my father remarked at the time I think that it was typical of her that she was willing to take it on.

MG Why is that? Tell me a little bit about the kind of person that your mother was?

EB She was at that time a very adventurous person. Late in life, she got alzheimer's disease and lost that adventuresomeness. But when, I like to remember her as a adventuress person.

MG So once she decided, once she agreed to do this, collect these songs, look for songs that nobody thought was there, how did she go about doing it?

EB Well with the advice of Phillips Barry she got another helper for that summer, George Brown, who was a friend of ours and conducted the Springfield Symphony Orchestra. And, ah, he went some places and she went some places. Later on, she got the help of Bernice Olney who is now deceased. But Miss Olney had a, a very good shorthand for taking down music. She was a graduate of the New England Conservatory who had gone into stenography. In the depression, one took what one could get. And that worked very well for her and for my mother.

MG Were you living at home at the time when this happened? Were you living with your mother?

EB Um, I think I was, let's see. What is the year?

MG 1930.

EB Oh I was, by that time in College. I'm Radcliff's 1934 and took a graduate year following so that I could take Paul Saxes museum course.

MG Did you, did your mother speak with you at all about the collecting she was doing, how it was going, how she _____?

EB Oh yes, oh yes. She, she was surprised at how well it was going. It never ceased to surprise her.

MG Can you remember any specific things that particularly stood out that she might have talked about any of the singers or any of the adventures that she might have had?

EB Oh yes. She, she had a fiddler called Paul Loretta that she took a lot of fiddle tunes from. And then there were brother and sister named Myra Daniels and, what was the brother's name? The brother was an auto salesman in Barre and Myra Daniels whose just a farmer's wife.

MG Was that Elmer George, the brother?

EB Yes. I think so.

MG And what surprised her about all of this?

EB Well she'd been told there weren't any and there were, that was all. Phillips Barry remarked that Cape Code which should have a lot was very baron of them.

MG Them being the child ballads?

EB Child ballads or anything. It was just plain baron of them. Whereas Vermont which shouldn't have any, had a lot.

MG Do you know why that was?

EB No. I'm just happy about it.

MG Did your mother have any theories as to why that was?

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EB No, I don't think so. She was, had just been confident that she would find them and she did. And I think that's, that's about the best I can say about her. Um, she didn't, a lot of the homes that she went to did not have electricity in those days. So she would hitch something up to the battery of her car and, and get them to come out and sing into, into something they had there. They didn't have mikes in those days and I forget how it was that she had them sing, but she had, she had records of some sort early on. Then later they had mikes and, and tapes and things. But tape, the tape recorder had not been invented yet which would have been a great help to her if it had.

MG What was the value of what your mother was doing?

EB Ah, the value was because things were, were not being taught by the grandfathers to their children because they weren't being, the invention of the radio had come about and people thought nothing was any good unless they heard it on the radio which was of course ridiculous to us nowadays. But it, it seemed to mean a great deal to them then.

MG So your mother was specifically looking for songs and material that people had learned in their families?

EB Yes. Things that have been handed down by ear, ear to mouth or whatever it's called, oral tradition.

MG Right. Would she get real excited after one of these trips?

EB Oh yes. She would be very happy.

MG Would she play the tapes for you or what did she do with the material once she had collected it?

EB Well the first ones she collected onto Edison stenography discs, that was the nearest thing to a tape that anybody had then. They weren't discs, they were cylinders. And then, I can't remember, oh yes, the next ones were done onto, onto records, 78 rpm records. And I can't remember the last ones, what they were put onto, but certainly it would have been wonderful if the tape recorder had been invented.

MG Did you listen to them at home?

EB Oh yes, enjoyed them. In fact, I was the person that transcribed a great many of them. My mother had absolute pitch, I had relative pitch. Absolute pitch meant that if A wasn't 40 rpm, it would upset her and whereas I could sit down and listen to them over and over again til I got an earache and gradually get them transcribed onto paper for her. I got an awful lot of earaches in those days.

MG I guess all of the singers were under the same quality?

EB A great many of them were good quality. And I certainly enjoyed doing that work very much.

MG Had you been aware of this tradition, this music?

EB Oh yes.

MG Yea.

EB See I knew it much more than my mother because of the Book of Ballads that I knew better than she did. But also of course there were ballads about things that had happened. More recently there was a Hartford Wreck for instance and I have heard that for a long time it wasn't allowed, that song was not allowed to be sung in the Hartford Region because there were so many people whose, who had been killed, relatives, survivors and so forth of people that had been killed in the wreck.

MG Do you remember when your mother decided to give the collection to Middlebury College and how she reached that decision?

EB Oh yes that is easy. It was offered to Dartmouth College which refused it because it didn't have any, it was not a New Hampshire thing and, and they they couldn't afford to pay somebody to take care of it as Miss Olney did in Middlebury. So she next offered it to Middlebury which was happy to accept it.

MG Why did she want it to be at one of those institutions instead of staying in the house?

EB Well it needed to be at a college where it could be more used and actually it is still being used a certain, to a certain extent in Middlebury. I have known several graduates of Middlebury who've told me how they had themselves been asked to use it. So I know that it was of a great help to them in the English Department. And my mother had a friend, Harry Goddard Owen, who, whom she first met when the Glee Club came down to sing in

Springfield at a concert. And he was very helpful. But I forget now what the most things that he did were, but he was always right there if she needed anything, actually the last years that I remember, he was Dean of all the summer schools including the French one.

MG You said before that your mother was an adventuress person and that's one of the reasons she did this. What else about her, she must have had some pretty special qualities that would enable her to go into strangers homes, probably people who were quite different from, from herself in many respects and...

EB Yes.

MG ...get them to open up and sing these songs?

EB I wouldn't know how you would describe it, but well she just liked people. That was the main thing.

MG And I guess people liked her?

EB Oh yes. That was easy to discover.

MG Did she keep up a relationship, a correspondence, or visiting?

EB Oh my yes.

MG Can you tell me about that?

EB Another thing that was suggested to her and, and she took up with it which I think must have been a great help was that she had every grange in the State asked its members if there was some songs that their grandparents used to sing and she got a lot of help from the Grange.

MG I understand she also put ads in newspapers?

EB Yes she did.

MG Yea. So would there be a lot of letters coming into the house?

EB A lot.

MG Yea. Did she check, follow-up every one?

EB Every one.

MG Wow. It must have been quite a, quite a task?

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EB Oh, it was. But she kept on going after that year that she was supported by the Carnegie Foundation and whatever it was. She used her own funds from then on. She had quite a lot of funds from her father's inventions.

MG Those were inventions in the machine/tool industry?

EB Yes, yes. And my father invented certain things too.

MG Take a second, I want to turn the tape over so I don't miss anything. Okay, continuing with Elizabeth Ballard. So when your mother began collecting in 1930 and the years immediately after that, was this what she did full-time or did she fit this in among a thousand other things? How did this fit into her life?

EB Well it, it fit in more or less to, let's see, my sister was in high school by then. My brother was not. You see, for some, some way my parents spaced their children 5 1/2 years apart, so that my brother is eleven years younger than I am. He's still living and you really should talk with him I think. And my sister died of cancer in the early years of '63. But she has five children living who are, except for the middle one who is a little bit odd, the, the others are all very delightful to know.

MG So your mother was still taking care of your younger brother and sister at the time she was doing this?

EB Yes she was.

MG Did she have another job also?

EB No, women didn't have, have jobs in Springfield in those days. She was just a housewife who had a, a cook.

MG Had she been active in other state or Springfield Civic kinds of functions?

EB Only the, the Springfield Community Orchestra. That was, I think about all.

MG Did she play in that?

EB No.

MG What was her relationship to it?

EB Just in, in getting people to play in it and you see she was only a pianist and you don't have a pianist in an orchestra mostly.

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MG Was she a sponsor, a patron...

EB I guess you'd say she...

MG ...an organizer?

EB I guess you'd say she was an organizer.

MG Okay. And about how old was she when in 1930?

EB She was born in 19, 1890 so she would be 40 years old then.

MG Let's switch over at least for the time being to your father, the Senator. He will probably figure in this series also. So let's just start with your telling me about him.

EB Well, the first time he ran for office, he was defeated by Aiken. But then Warren Austin was pulled into the UN and so he, Austin appointed him in a way before he ran. That is, this was so that he could, could have his, be on the committees he wanted to be in. Although he hadn't quite been elected yet. Austin was right there to help him the minute he was elected. And he had no trouble with re-election his second term.

MG What year was he appointed?

EB Um, oh dear.

MG It must have been the late '40's?

EB Yes.

MG Yes. Okay. Now he had been an industrialist, is that right?

EB Yes.

MG Tell me about that?

EB And he had written a book called "Taming our Machines" earlier. I guess you might be able to find a copy in, in Baker Library or somewhere. I'm not sure.

MG Well give me a little bit of his background as an industrialist, of his inventions, the things that you mentioned a short while ago?

EB Well, the only thing that is still being made or used not in, no that's a Hartness invention, the _____ which was the first time you could look through a magnified thing and see something which had been very small. It was the Hartness _____. My father and his brother won a Franklin, oh dear what, what did they call those things? It was a, Franklin medal for one of their inventions, but I can't think what it was at the moment. But it was something they worked on together, my father and his brother Ernest.

MG Now did your father own one of the machine/tool plants in Springfield?

EB Ah, yes I guess he owned the Johnson Lamson after my, my grandfather was too old to carry on.

MG I see, had your grandfather been the founder of Johnson Lamson?

EB Practically.

MG And this was...

EB This was original Robbins and Lawrence in Windsor. Then it was moved onto Springfield and called Johnson Lamson.

MG I see.

EB Now.

MG So your father then became the Junior Senator from Vermont?

EB Yes.

MG Aiken was the Senior Senator?

EB Right.

MG What kind of, what were his political leanings, what did he hope to accomplish in the Senate?

EB Well, he said he was a, a liberal conservative which I guess is about the best, best way you could put it.

MG What did he, or what do you think he meant by that?

EB He meant that he was a conservative in some ways and a liberal in others. I think it was conservative in fiscal things and a liberal in human social things.

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MG Can you give me an example of either of those areas?

EB Oh yes. I remember that he was voting against Nato because he didn't think we could afford it. But certainly the McCarthy business was social.

MG Let's talk about that specifically. Um...

EB Well he just, he just wanted to get McCarthy, oh dear what do they call it?

MG Impeached? Censured?

EB Censured, that was it.

MG Why?

EB Well there were, I could give you dozens of reasons, but I can't think of one at the moment.

MG Can you give me a generalization that would?

EB Well they...

MG What didn't he like about Senator McCarthy?

EB McCarthy was so afraid of communists that he was calling everybody that he didn't like a communist. My sister and her family were, were sort of, well they'd just come back from Australia where they had spent a year. He was forming a CIA unit down there. And they did not agree with the rest of us on this. They said that, that communism was too dangerous _____ and if McCarthy was against it, that was enough. That they were for him.

MG From what I've heard about your father, it doesn't, and from what you've said, the conservative side, it doesn't sound like he was sympathetic toward communism, that was not _____.

EB Definitely not.

MG So then what was, was his reason for objecting to what McCarthy was doing?

EB Well McCarthy was, had actually gotten himself to doing things that the State Department should have done and taking credit for them. And that was ridiculous of course.

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MG Was your father concerned at all about the effect of McCarthy on Civil Liberties, on...

EB Oh yes.

MG ...constitution?

EB The McCarthy army hearings were the thing that finally decided that he had got to do this if nobody else would. Lately I have read a lot of, of things that suggested that the Senator from New York at that time was responsible. But that's not so, it was my father.

MG Do you recall anything about his state of mind or his, what he was like at this time and what it was like for him to take this pretty bold and like grave move of suggesting _____ and another Senator I understand that was quite dramatic?

EB Oh it was. Ah, well it just seemed like something that somebody ought to do and if nobody else is going to do it, he would and he did. My mother had to, had to change and unlist the telephone number because she got, she was getting so many crank calls from people. She was of course at home. But I think the interesting thing is that nobody would go near my father in the Senate and my mother went down every noon and had lunch with him in the Senate dining room so he wouldn't be alone.

MG He was avoided because the other Senators were afraid?

EB Yes.

MG Afraid of McCarthy?

EB Afraid of McCarthy.

MG But ultimately your father prevailed?

EB Yes. Mrs. McCarthy would, my mother, he had recently been married and I think she wished her all happiness. Though I think McCarthy was a gay actually.

MG Huh. How long did your father remain in the Senate?

EB Another term. And then my mother had a stroke, so that he decided he wouldn't run for a third term.

MG And she lived in Washington with him while he was in the Senate?

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EB Oh yes.

MG So that the phone number she had changed or unlisted was the, their Washington phone number?

EB That's right.

MG What was the response, were you still in Vermont at the time in Springfield or were you here in Norwich?

EB Well let's see. I, what was that year?

MG It was around 1953, '54.

EB Oh, I was, I was married in '38. So I was, I was here. One of the nice things about my father was that he would take each of his grandchildren down for a visit in Washington and show them just the things that were, that were right for their age and interest. Now I remember that, my sister, I mean my eldest daughter went down and what they used to do is take the train, get off at Springfield, Mass. have supper at the Highland Hotel, get back on a later train that went to Washington in those days. And I remember my daughter saying the, the Highland Hotel is all covered with diamonds, pearls and rubies. And later on, my older son went down and he reported to me afterwards, "You know those 2 X 4's that hold up the Highland Hotel." And I thought what differences these two children of mine.

MG Really. Do you recall what any of the local Vermont reaction was to Senator Flanders move to censure Senator McCarthy?

EB It was on the most part positive.

MG Were there editorials in the newspaper _____?

EB Oh yes, oh yes.

MG Describe some of it to me.

EB Well they were, they were mostly in favor of it. And I can't remember any of them now. We were already taking the Rutland Herald at that point. And they were very much in favor of my father. I'm not certain about the Bennington Banner or the St. Johnsbury Caledonian, but I think they were.

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MG Do you think there, there was or is some special character, some special quality of the Vermont character that was a common thread between your father's action and the positive response in Vermont?

EB No, not particularly. I think the, the Vermont character was best studied when Coolidge said, "I do not choose to run," and they were trying to find out what Vermonters by choose. That was a long time earlier.

MG Did you or your family know him at all? Was there any...

EB Oh yes.

MG Oh okay. Well we got to talk about him too then. Tell me about the silent Cal.

EB He was down from Plymouth to, with his family, including the son who died. Just a few, a few weeks before Harding's death and we have a photograph somewhere that was, was taken of, of the group then. And, Miss Coolidge evidently was a lovely person.

MG And what about Mr. Coolidge?

EB Oh, he was alright.

MG Can you give me any more of a description of him?

EB (LAUGH) No. You said that, that he wasn't very conversational, that's all I can say. (LAUGH)

MG So you think the silent Cal reputation is well deserved?

EB Oh yes.

MG Was he a friend of your father's, is that what the connection was?

EB No, he was a friend of my grandfather's.

MG Oh.

EB Grandfather Hartness.

MG Who had been Governor?

EB Yes, that's right.

MG So would they visit and talk politics or go fishing together or what?

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EB Well, I wouldn't say that they talked much. (LAUGH) I guess probably they, they just visited a little bit, that was it.

MG You were still quite young when he became President?

EB Oh yes.

MG Did that mean anything to you, that a family friend, somebody you knew was now President of the United States?

EB No.

MG Did you or your family ever visit him in Washington?

EB No.

MG Or did he visit here again after he had been President?

EB Well, he took the Oath of Office from his father as you remember by lamp light. And then while he was still President, his father died. And Cheshire Bridge, well he had, he probably took a train from Washington to Bellows Falls and then there were secret service men that, that were in his car and the car following and he knew enough to, to pay \$.10 at, at Cheshire Bridge, but the car following, the secret service men said to the, the man, the collector at the Cheshire Bridge, "Did you know that the man in the car ahead of you held the President of the United States?" And they man, unfaced said, "\$.10 Please."

MG (LAUGH) He wasn't too impressed.

EB No.

MG (LAUGH) That's great.

EB Impossible to impress Mrs. Styles.

MG Uh huh. Uh huh. Okay. Well I think this has been very helpful and very enjoyable.

EB I hope it has. And I really think you should talk with my brother.

MG I shall do that. Is he up in Springfield now?

EB He has retired and spends most of his time in Springfield on Highland Road.