

“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.

Greg Belcher
June 9, 1987

Interviewer
Mark Greenberg

MG To start out, Mr. Belcher, would you just give me a statement of I'm Greg Belcher, I have lived in Calais, etc.

GB I am Greg Belcher. I have summered in Calais since I was 6 years old, lived in Calais from the time I retired in 1968 until 5 years ago. As far as I am concerned, after I was presumably adopted by my maternal uncle and aunt, I became devoted to Calais and I always thought of it as my home, as my two cousins did too. We thought Calais was home, not Boston where we were living. Both my brother and I came here when we retired, so I guess it is as close to home as we have gotten. Although I lived I think it was in 19 different houses after I got married. I travelled a lot with the International Paper Company where I was employed first as a forester and later as a founder and manager of the Operations and Research Department.

MG Excuse me for one minute okay.

GB I gather the idea of this is that you would like to have something of the earlier part, not the earliest but the earlier part of this century on travel.

MG That is part of it, right.

GB And on rural industry in this town. Is that right?

MG Those would be fine. Let me find a little more about you first. You were born in Boston.

GB Born in Braintree, MA.

MG When, what year?

GB 1903.

MG You first came to Vermont when?

GB 1909.

MG Can you put that in a sentence for me?

GB I was born in Braintree, MA in 1903 and came to Vermont first in 1909 with my foster parents who were really my maternal uncle and his wife who was a native of Calais. The whole family, five of us, really thought of Calais as being home and Boston was a place where Dad had to go to work because he was in the schools down there. But

the trips up here in the early part. We first came by train which was more or less of an adventure and a bore. Got off the train at Montpelier Junction and took the Montpelier-Williamstown Barre train to Montpelier. A long ride that one was. But it was a long ride coming from Boston. We always had a cat to go with us in a basket. I do remember one time when Dad said he thought that the cat had been in the basket long enough and we travelled in the day coach, so he had a long string with him so he let the cat out of the basket, hooked the string to the cats collar and the cat immediately went down under the benches, the seats, to the other end of the car, the full length of the string. Then I was dispatched to bring Mico back to the basket again and he would travel the rest of the way in the basket. When we got to Montpelier, somebody from Calais met us with a team and usually an express wagon and we would come back up to what we call the cottage about a mile north of Maple Corner where mother, when I say mother, this is my aunt, she was always my mother from 1909 on. My own family was completely disrupted by death. When we got up there, mother would try to make us get cleaned up and go to bed most quickly. But we had to get our shoes and stockings off and get out and feel the grass of Vermont under our feet again. It was a hard long day, no doubt about that. The train was not fast, it smelled of bananas and soot and everything you touched was sootie. But the real adventure started when we came by car. Dad acquired from a friend a 1911 Perry, touring car. Brass fittings on the front around the windshield. Brass braces to keep the windshield from blowing back, a one-man top that four men couldn't put up. Still we had the cat to carry. I remember particularly one trip when something happened not to that car, but to the next one. The Mets Master Six. It broke down in Hill, NH. There is no Hill Village anymore, because it is under water. There is a power reservoir there. We had to stay overnight in Hill. We slept in a hotel. Mother said Oscar what will I do with the cat? Dad said wrap him up in that gray blanket and carry him as if he were a baby. Well mother did, Dad went in and registered. We went upstairs with mother carrying the baby. We had two rooms. Bill and I slept in one and Dad and Mother and Natalie slept in the other. There was a fireplace in that room where Mico the cat was released from the blanket, he immediately went up the fireplace. Well Dad said that settled that question, we don't have to take him out anyway. After due course, she came down and immediately jumped up on the bed and left black footprints right across

the bed which mother was worried about considerably. But the old Perry was a real oldtimer. In the morning of course, the process had to be reversed, mother wrapped Mico up, but nothing was said but the footprints were left behind I'm sure. The old Perry did give a lot of excitement. We carried two pails with us. On every steep hill. There were no paved roads. The roads were laid out as straight as possible. They didn't avoid the hills. Any steep hill, Dad would always stop at the watering trough. We would fill the radiator. But sometimes he'd forget to stop at the watering trough and Bill and I would take the pails and go back down to the watering trough. It was always down and we had to walk back up the hill carrying the water to fill the old Perry. She was a very thirsty old beast.

MG Was this a steam driven car?

GB No, no, it was a gasoline engine.

MG But the water was to cool down the radiator.

GB The water was to cool it off. It overheated very rapidly. The worst trip we ever had and I don't remember, but it must have been the Perry, because we got a good early start from Boston, Jamaica Plain where we lived. Where we stayed in the winter. We got a good early start. Dad said we are going to get going today in good fashion. We packed a big lunch. We ate lunch in front of the cemetery at Concord, Massachusetts. I don't know what, 20 miles from Jamaica Plain, because we had changed two flat tires. Now when you changed a tire, then you repaired it and put it back on. Dad was an expert at taking them off and putting them on after he had done two that trip. But he didn't do them very well to start with. That was the most exciting trip we had because of the long delay. We got here late late at night. We didn't stop anywhere that time, we came right through. We did eat in a hotel, but we didn't stay overnight. We were tired. But when we got up here, immediately we three kids would take off our shoes and stockings. It was a battle with mother if we went to Montpelier, if we went to Church to get us back into shoes and stockings again. But we managed to survive. Bill did drive a nail into his foot, but outside of that we had no serious adventures. Then we became, all three of us kids, we became thoroughly acquainted with all the neighbors around and it impresses me when I think today there are so few farms still operating. Everything is growing up to trees, unopen, unmowed places and then everything was mowed so clean, except where they cut their firewood. Then the woods were allowed to grow there. They had to

have firewood. The farming was simpler. I presume it was harder, but the production was certainly lower than it is today. There were no tractors, not for a long long time. Not until I guess I was in college before they began to have tractors in here at all. Everything was done by horse and manpower. Haying was a big event. I married a girl from Maple Corners, Josephine Converse. Her father was one of the most energetic of all the people around. He was also an avid reader. I remember he always had a good hired man, Eddie Bilbran, the old road commissioner worked for your grandfather.

MG Is this Neil Converse?

GB No, Burt. Neil was a younger man. Burt came up here from Montpelier. He was born over on what we call the Converse Road. But he had been to high school in Montpelier and worked as night clerk at the Pavilion Hotel. He worked as an undertakers assistant and finally the doctor told him he would have to get out of the city. So he came up to Calais. He married a Calais girl just the way I did. He was always four handed. A very energetic worker. He would get his haying done and then he would lie under the big pine tree that used to stand out in front of the Converse place in Maple Corners reading and watching his friends hustle down to the creamery to leave their milk and hustle back to get at their haying. They were always behind Burt. One of things I really remember about haying is going up to the Slayton farm, Maylam Slayton farm up above the cottage about a mile and a quarter from Maple Corners and eventually getting to where Maylam Slayton would let me drive the horse rig, raking up the scatterings. I remember the first day I drove it, I knocked down one of the bar posts and the fence and Maylam said "Now Gregory you know I built the gates, those barways, everyone of them on the whole farm, wide enough to take the piece of equipment that you are driving right there, that hay rig. All you have to do is to put one wheel just as close to one bar post as you can and the other one will go through without your even looking at it". Well I found out that worked pretty well. But even after I went through high school and went away to college, I looked forward to coming back here in the summer as much as I could. I became very close friends with Roy Slayton. Roy was about my age and he had a horse. He had a lovely horse. Blanche was her name. I tell more about her later. Dad also had a horse. Old Ike. Now Old Ike was not in the class of Roy's Blanche, not even in the class of Bartie that came after Old Ike at our house. But Dad finally decided that he had to get rid of Old Ike. Ike was very slow, very very slow. Dad sold Ike to

John Graham for \$5.00. He was very cross with Bill, because Bill said oh let him have him Dad, don't bother any more, let him have Ike. John took Ike and Ike got back down here to Kents Corner and died. Mother made Dad give John back his \$5.00. Did you know about that? Anyway, after that we had Bartie. Bartie was a very spirited mare. Mother didn't like to drive. But Aunt Little would come down from Morrisville and they would go to Montpelier. You didn't go down this morning and come back for lunch and then go back down in the afternoon because you had forgotton something and come home for supper and then go back in the evening and go to the movies. You went down once and it seemed to me that whenever the ladies went to Montpelier, they all came back with sick headaches. We had to walk around quietly for quite awhile. It was a hard trip.

MG How long would it take?

GB Well, it is 10 miles. It would take I suppose an hour or an hour and a half. If you took Old Ike, it took you practically all day to go down and back. You didn't have time for any shopping. They always hired somebody elses horse to go down for that. But there were no cars. I can't remember what year it was when Eljin Mann the storekeeper up here had a car. Dr. Wheeler, who was the doctor at Maple Corners, he had a car. These were the only two cars in town, on this side of town. Going over to East Calais where you had to go down the hill and up the hill, so you didn't go over there very much. We didn't know very many people in East Calais. I know more people in East Calais now then I did then. The trip to Montpelier the list was made out over a long period of time and finally got long enough to warrant a trip down there. Of course, Eljin Mann ran the store at Maple Corner and they had everything there from food, drugs to well they even had a repair shop for automobiles in there. But they didn't have any automobiles. Not until much later. That came in later. There was a blacksmith shop there, but the store was a big two and a half story house over the brook with a Post Office built on one end of it and you could get literally everything that you needed to keep body and soul together. His wife, Florence Mann, had been a nurse and she had quite a supply of home remedies there. Many people went there, rather than hollaring for the doctor. A pretty self-sufficient time. Things really fed themselves. Practically clothed themselves. Josie Converse, Burt's wife, she made all the girls clothes. They had four children left to grow up, but she made all of the four girls clothes, practically all of them. She also sat up with the sick

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as they said. She ran the library that was at the Maple Corners school and played the organ at the church. She was very busy. Very energetic woman.

MG If I may interrupt. You say that the community was more self-sufficient then.

GB Much more so.

MG What about in terms of social life. What was that like? Can you describe that?

GB Yes. In the Grange Hall, which is now the Community Club, and also in Bonahams Camp Comfort, that was on Curtis Pond, the mouth of Curtis Pond, near where the swimming area for the town is now. They had dances there, community suppers and what not. I remember going to a dance at Camp Comfort one time with the girl whom I married later and there were three or four young fellows. Girls could come out from Montpelier or one of those foreign countries. There were three or four young women around at the dance that were pregnant. I remember very plainly one of these young fellas was looking the situation over and saying let's get out of this maternity ward and go somewhere we can have some fun. They went away. We had dances. I have heard but I have never been to one, they had singing schools. They had dancing schools. They gave plays. One of the poorest farmers in town, one of the hardest workers was one of the best actors that you could ever ask for, Fred Batchelder. He lived up in the house that Bill and I bought together at the head of Curtis Pond. Well his mother said one time, he always butchered on the hottest day of the year. When the meat would spoil the most quickly. But there was always something going on.

MG Did people come in from outside, dancing masters and singing masters? Or were these from inside the community?

GB Both. ??? played the violin very well. He taught square dances and he was a rigid teacher. You did it right or you started over again. Very very cross with you if you didn't. "That's not the way to do it all!" But it was fun. We learned a lot that way.

MG Was there contra dancing?

GB We didn't call it that. It was all square dancing practically. They began to waltz some, but not too much.

MG Were the square dances all done in squares.

GB No, they were mixed up. The Virginia Reel and the Portland Fancy. A dozen different varieties. Anybody that was any good, knew them all. I didn't know any of them. I never did get them straight.

MG But you didn't use the term contra dancing?

GB Never, never heard it.

MG Did you ever have kitchen junkits or kitchen tonks?

GB I never heard that either. People would talk about three or four families might get together at somebodys house, but I never heard the term kitchen junkit. Junkit was some kind of fancy stuff you made out of milk. I never heard of that term until I had grown up.

MG If I understand correctly, to use a contemporary term, you were really kind of summer people way back then, right?

GB Yes, there wasn't any doubt about that. We lived in Boston a greater part of the year. We didn't live in Boston, we existed in Boston waiting to come back here. Well Dad was just as bad as the rest of us. It was home to mother. They buried her up here in the cemetery.

MG Did they work in this area or was this vacation time?

GB This was vacation. That was the worst part of it. They would only come at vacation time. Dad came up after graduating from Harvard and taught at Montpelier Seminary and he met mother there. He used to tell of how finally he got where he was invited up to the house. Captain Moore, kind of stand offish about this city fella, said now young fella, you take the goed and get the oxen. They are up in the back pasture and you bring them down. Dad like everybody else could harness and drive a horse. That was nothing. But he never bothered, never had anything to do with oxen. They used draft horses in Boston. So Dad took the goed and away he went. He got up to the top of the hill, in back of the cottage and all the oxen were up there, the pair of them together. Dad said I didn't know what to do, but I stepped up pretty close to them and I waved the goed and I said Wooish. I had heard them say that anyway. And away they went. Down over the hill. I said to myself, there goes the oxen and the girl too. I came down and there were the oxen standing at the gate waiting to go up to the barn. The Captain said, I didn't think you could do it young fella.

MG What was it that he waved? Say it again.

GB Goad. It is a stick about the diameter of that standard with a prod at one end of it. I never saw anybody stick the prod into an ox, but they always had a prod in it. They would lay it across and say Wooish and away would go the team. The oxen were not in use very often when I started coming here. There were two or three people had a yoke of oxen, but most everybody had horses, good horses, big horses, draft horses you know. Good drivers. I came up with my sister Natalie one Christmas vacation. I was going to see that girl at Maple Corners and she stayed with the Converse and I stayed with the Slaytons. But we went to two dances. They had an oyster supper and dance at the Memorial Hall in North Calais and we went that night with Blanche, Roy's horse. It was a cold, cold night. I think it was 50 cents a couple for the oyster supper and the dance. We came home quite late and Josie Converse was sitting up to see that the girls got home anyway. We we got to the Converse place, it was 28 below 0. The next night we went to a dance in the old hall over to East Calais. That's gone. Still with Blanche. Of course, we had soap stones, buffalo robes and what not to keep warm. That night when we got back, it was 32 below. But we weren't cold.

MG What did the soad stones do?

GB Soap stones. You don't know what soap stones are?

MG I know what soap stone is but I have never heard it used for that.

GB It is cut in a square or an oblong and you put them on the stove and warm them up. Then you put your feet on them when you got into the sleigh. That kept you from freezing your feet. Everybody had soap stones. You had your own with your initials on them. Everywhere you went there was a stove and a rack that you could put your soap stones on. Put the horses out in the wagon shed. There were horse sheds out back of the old West Church, out back of Memorial Hall, out back of the hall, they were everywhere. You would put the horses in undercover, blanket them and put your soap stones on the stove and you were alright.

MG So when did cars start replacing the horses?

GB They didn't replace the horses for a long time.

MG Let's wait, there is a truck going by, let's wait till that passes. There is goes. Okay. Let's start that one over again.

GB I can't say. Automobiles, Dr. Wheeler and Eljin Mann had the first two and you could hear either one of them coming when they were a mile and a half to two miles away. Boy, I almost think it was after the World War I. I almost think so. Tractors didn't come in to replace the horse until. Everybody knew a tractor would tip over on a field like that. One out back did you know that was not. They are perfectly useless here. That was all there was to it. Now of course, you can't find a farm that is running anyway, but you couldn't find a farm, 10 - 15 years ago that wasn't all tractorized.

MG But when your family was coming up, you had a car, right? The Perry.

GB Yes, the Perry and the Master 6 and the Maxwell and the Chrysler.

MG When did you get the Perry?

GB Well it was a 1911 job. I think it was a year old when Dad bought it. In Woodbury. Leo Johnson was the salesman and he bought it and traded it for the Master 6. He took that in trade for the Master 6. Then he went down to Montpelier and set up in the Chevy business. First Chrysler then he went into the Chevy business. The horses they were the main stay. Every morning down by our place, by the cottage there, every morning there were so many, a dozen teams anyway that went by with the milk going down to the creamery down at Maple Corner. One time, my wife and I sat down, I have one of those old wallings maps 1852, I think it is. The family names were on many of the houses. My wife and I sat down one time. She knew everybody of course being brought up here and I knew quite a few of them. I hate to say this, I think that we could name over 60 farms that delivered milk to the Maple Corner Creamery on this side of town. That may be an exaggeration, but I am sure we could name over 50. I can show you where many of the buildings were. They are gone, gone. This place here has been a doctors house and a small farm. As far as I know, it was never in the Kent family. The Kent family started next door, but there was several different families lived here and there was a barn that stood out back there, there was always horses here of course. One or two cows. The man that lived here the last I can remember worked out around. But my sister-in-law had

a tooth pulled on the old porch that used to run out by through where the kitchen is by the doctor that was here. Your Aunt Sylvia, she sat on the steps and he stood on the ground and pulled the tooth.

MG When cars started coming in, were people as skeptical about them as they were about tractors.

GB No. I don't think so. I remember there was a boy from over back of the pond that drove from Maple Corner down to Montpelier in 30 minutes and back in the same time and everybody said he is going to kill himself that is all there is to it. It can't go that fast. Many people thought you know up until after World War I that if you went too fast, your body would disintegrate. Even though the trains were going 60 mph or faster. But you couldn't go too fast.

MG Can you describe what Montpelier was like back in the days when you would come in on the trains.

GB I can remember very plainly, that it was a dirt road wherever you went in Montpelier. I can't quite place where the livery stable was where we left the horse when we went shopping. I don't quite remember where that was, but you would leave your horse there all day for \$.50. The horse would be fed and watered, ready to take you home. But the streets were all dirt and I have seen a picture just lately. Somebody sent me one when I was in the hospital. You could see the ruts in the street. It must have been a spring picture. They used to leave the sleigh that the stage carried the mail back and forth in for part of the time they left the sleigh at the top of Clay Hill going out of Montpelier north and changed the wheels there to come down into the city. They going back, they would leave the wagon there until the next day. You could leave stuff around. We didn't have thieves. They just weren't there.

MG Did people travel by sleigh in the wintertime?

GB Oh yes, there was no other way to go. The roads were rolled with the heavy roller you know.

MG Can you describe that?

GB Oh, I could show you a picture if you were down in Florida. I got a picture of one down there.

MG Well how about telling me. This is for the radio.

GB The roller was about I would say 12 feet wide and would stand 10 feet high. It had a seat up on top. There were always two men that went with the roller. Six horses

generally drawing it. The idea was to compact the snow so that it would be a good solid base and it lasted a long time in the spring. Then when it went off, it was really mud time. It was built of wood and it gets its weight from the fact that it was wood. It was built of heavy planks. Well that is about all there was to it.

MG They didn't have to plow at all?

GB No, they didn't plow. They rolled it. They wanted to keep it. They didn't want to get the snow off the road. They wanted to keep the snow on the road, it is much better, easier for a horse to draw a sleigh than it is a wagon. No plowing was the last thing in the world they wanted to do.

MG When did they start changing the way they maintained the roads?

GB When automobiles came in.

MG Then after World War I?

GB I would say so. I never saw a snow roller here myself, but I have seen them in Camelton and New Brunswick. They used to roll the roads up there when I was there in 1927 - 1928.

MG Do you remember at all, there must have been discussion at town meeting about changing over from snow rollers to plows?

GB I wasn't here at town meeting time you see. No, I don't. I know there would be discussion, there has always been discussion about the roads. I can remember one place where they left the road altogether. Up on the County Road going north out of town here. In the winter, they left the road and went down through the field because the snow drifted so under that hill up by Byron Sanders. Let me see, what else is there that might interest you. Wintertime of course was the time when the dances and the plays and the music schools were on because there wasn't so much work to do. Just to get out the wood for the next two or three years. They raised a great deal of home grown stuff. Every woman canned vigorously and everybody raised potatoes. Somebody said the other day that there must be, I don't know but it was that lady sitting right there, that how poor people must have been because of the low cash flow. They spent a lot of time raising food. I have even heard people say that going over to East Calais to get a grist ground. They grind oats for wheat even. That's what they call peaking down here. Peaking was because they raised peaking wheat down there which was a good hard wheat. They didn't have to spend much money, they didn't have much