

“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.

William Hall
July 2, 1987

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK I just want to get on top of the tape that I am with Mr. William Hall, Thompson's Point in Charlotte and it the 2nd of July. This is a Green Mountain Chronicles interview. Let's start with a little bit of background about where you were born and where you grew up.

WH I was born in Burlington, grew up here. Burlington Public High School then a couple of years at the University of Vermont.

MK When were you born?

WH July 10, 1906.

MK That's interesting. I would really like to get a picture of what Burlington was like as you were growing up. How does it compare to what Burlington is now. Obviously now it is much more developed, but what do you remember about the neighborhood you grew up in? What did it look like?

WH Actually I don't think it looks all that different now. I was born on Bayview Street along about and went to the Adams School. You could crawl underneath the fence to get to school for the first two or three years. I think about in the third grade somewhere along there that we moved down around the corner onto South Union Street in that area between Bayview and Cliff.

MK Were there many automobiles at that time in Burlington?

WH Not very many. The, see while I was in Junior High School, the Fire Department was still horse drawn. As I recall about that time the, you still had horse drawn cabs to get to the railroad station or anything like that. And the street cars on the track there.

MK Someone has told me a story that I haven't been able to yet find anyone who can remember being ^{at} but I was told about I think it was when Vermont Transit really got going and started up that there was a big bonfire. They burned the last trolley or something like that as a sort of symbol that the era of the trolley was over. Do you remember anything about that?

WH That would have been, I wouldn't, I would not have been around then.

MK Uh huh.

WH See I really didn't see a heck of a lot. I was around back here in the summer but generally here rather than in Burlington.

MK I see.

WH After, oh when would that have been? Along toward, after 1925.

MK Has your family always had this place as long as you can remember?

WH Yea, Dad built the cottage. Dad built the cottage that you came by the big one in about, what was it about 4 years before I was born. That's 1902. The cottage you are in here now, my wife and I built when the grandchildren started getting numerous and we needed to expand and rather than putting an addition on the other house we built this as a guest house without the guests. It has worked out well. There will be about seven or eight children and grandchildren arriving in the other cottage tomorrow.

MK It is a wonderful spot. One of the people who is working on this project with me had, and I remember this and I'll ask you before I forget, had asked if I would ask you if you knew anything about trading with between native americans and any of the people living around here. I mean the Abnaki folks going, sort of going back and forth through or any...

WH Oh I have a very, quite vivid probably highly inaccurate recollection to that. There was an Abnaki family here on the point when I arrived, the time when I was born. Simon O'Brien, I don't remember his wife's name. There were other people on the point that could tell you when. I don't a great deal of that detail. Their cottage just a little ways down here making baskets, bows and arrows for the children and so forth. The, I had the fun of, one of the things that impressed me I wished I had sense enough to take pictures of it at the time watching the building of a birch bark canoe starting I was out with them in the woods picking out a likely sized birch tree to cut down to get the bark and assembling that and putting it together to see that whole process go on and see what a birch bark canoe actually was. It is an amazingly heavy vehicle actually in comparison with the ordinary things that old town made and so forth at

that time but.

MK It's amazing. That's a wonderful memory to have isn't it.

WH Yea.

MK That's great. You say ...

WH Then the, yea, then during the winter, the two girls that, Marian and Marie I think if I remember the names correctly they would be back and forth from the reservation in Canada. They would drop by one of the sisters, would drop by in Burlington on her way down selling baskets and as I recall also things like hand embroidery and things like that that the Indians from the reservation were doing. They would stop off in Burlington on their way down through to New York where she finally would presumably sell them to dealers there for getting income. I still got some, a few of the baskets around. Some of the things, chairs that we had here, I've decided they would last longer if they were up in the Charlotte Historical Society Museum.

MK Now when was that when they would travel down selling

WH That was still going on, that I think, yea, that was still going on after I got through school and along into the '30's I think. Then William the son, carried on after Simon died and he, I don't recall dates on that, it was fairly recent within the last. It was two or three years before I built this house which I guess was about 20 years ago come to think of it. It is a while gone, something over that where his house burned down unfortunately and with it kinda gruesome from what I heard at the time but...

MK It was an accident?

WH Yea, apparently in the fall.

MK You say there were other people who could give more information about the family. Who would they be if I wanted to get in touch with them?

WH Bill Carroll is the probably the most active historian type around here and Donald Gibbs another one I have a lot of faith in what he can remember.

MK And they are living right here?

William Hall

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WH They are between here and the end of the point. Yes they are.

MK I think I might have passed a mailbox with the name Carroll on it. Could I? Would have I gone past?

WH Yea, as you came back. If you came in the way I suggested you do.

MK Yes. Well let's wander our way back now to the University of Vermont and you went to UVM starting when? You were 17, 18?

WH Let's see. See I just turned 17 I guess when I before the freshman year. I think. 1906, 1923.

MK Did you know you were going to major in engineering at that point or?

WH Pretty much. It sounds crazy. I had been involved quite a bit while I was still in high school. See I was a junior in high school. I guess I started in 1909, that article there says 1919, when radio was again legal in this country and people coming back. By that time, I had been trying to play around even earlier than that as a kid. I had my own radio set at home and very quickly got invited to the radio club along with others around town to hear their, take part in their meetings and get acquainted there. So I ended up, I was invited by the radio club while I was still a junior in high school to go to the state fair in let's see 1921 representing the agricultural college extension service in the college so far as introducing radio to the people of Vermont. The next year, I was still more active with the radio club and ended up actually during the winter, see I played football, not very effectively in the fall my senior year in high school and then kept on during that winter and training in the gym for the track team and running with the college students in the gym while I was still in high school. I sort of gradually, I was practically into the college for the year before I entered as a freshman.

MK You had your crowd of friends already really.

WH And an older brother. I already, parents went there. Parents are both class of '89. Had a sister class of '18. Her husband also class of '18 and in the war and a brother a year ahead of me at UVM.

William Hall

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MK A couple of things I wanted to pick up on the radio club was a UVM radio club.

WH Yea, yea.

MK It was a college organization?

WH That was a college organization and the members of it. There's this article that you found from 1922 gives a very good story. George Brody that I considered the ring leader there and obviously was. He was a chem-engineering student at UVM but had been a radio operator during the war and a radio hand before that. He was sort of the ring leader. He got the thing started. And uh, but we are inviting other people anyone around town that was interested in radio to come to the meetings and see and hear what was going on.

MK What was the idea at that point? Did people, was radio being pursued as as like ham operators or were people thinking really in terms of commercial broadcasts and reaching out on the countryside?

WH The radio amateurs were getting very much involved at that time. Vacuum tubes were developed. Actually they as I believe things I've run into more recently vacuum tubes as such actually started years before that but never got developed to where things were really working right with them. Making radio, making amplifiers and things like that more practically available and radio telephony was coming in so that people ordered their broadcasting music. KDKA as I remember it was there was a radio ham involved broadcasting music and so forth and entertainment, news and so forth. The American Radio Relay League activity started by name, it was a relay service getting messages around the country and so forth and trying to see how far away they could communicate and all that sort of thing. But the radio, the radio telephony and broadcasting was coming in and there were no, I don't remember the exact dates but the first licensed broadcast station came was somewhere around just about that same time so people, everybody starting to get interested in having radios, radio receivers at home to listen to that kind of thing.

MK Did many people have radio receivers in Vermont that you knew of that they could listen to changes in New York or wherever they could pick some up?

William Hall

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WH Yea, that, they were getting them rather fast and furiously at that time and while I was still in high school a job of installing radios commercially bought radios for various people around Burlington that, what the actual account I don't have any idea.

MK But a number of households..._____?

WH Oh, they were getting all over the place at that time.

MK The one thing I want to ask you about too is why is the agricultural extension service so particularly interested in, why was that part of the college, the one that pushed the radio?

WH Well, you read the articles that came out at that time. It was exactly the same sort of thing that the public television now claims for what is trying to do. The wording is almost identical as to what you hear going on now.

MK Tell me some of what that was like? What were they saying that they wanted to do?

WH The best way to do that would be to actually quote — just read that article... pardon

MK I said I want to get it on the tape .

WH Let me see if I can find the right place here. I'm sorry to...quote...If I don't I've got the actual, I've got the actual article. Let's see. October 24, Burlington Free Press announced a new "Weekly Educational and Entertainment Service furnished by the Extension Service in cooperation with the several Instructional and Research Departments to the University, to radio owners in Vermont and neighboring territory. The initial program featured the 5 minutes addresses by University of Vermont officials beginning with President Guy Bailey, including Dean Pinkham of College of Medicine, J. W. Vohty of Engineering, J. L. Hills of College of Agricultural and Jock Frederick Tupper the College of Arts and Sciences. The ROTC band furnished the music for the first of the weekly programs. Planned to carry at least one number dealing with agriculture or home economics and concerts, short talks and various other features. WCAX expected, the Free Press continued, such talent as can be secured from the University, the City and throughout the state generally will be asked to aide

in giving promoters something worthwhile from Vermont. From the University will come all manners of talks from the trained experts of the various departments. These will include educational talks, agricultural talks, health talks, literary talks and pure entertainment talks. Concerts by the university band, by the men's and women's glee clubs and by arranged instrument organizations will likewise be offered. Individual talent from the student body as well as from the faculty, notably musicians and readers, will add to the programs. Whenever possible the programs of outside artists who are presenting entertainments in Burlington will be broadcasts. College players, reports of games, fraternity stunts will constitute features. The Agricultural Extension Service will rent a timely service regularly to its farmer constituency and immediate service in case of emergency.

That was, without spelling out in detail, just about what the object of being in the public regular, public T.V. is still trying to do.

MK It really would seem like an educational service.

WH An educational service. One of the amusing things is only when I was talking with someone active a couple years ago I think with the Vermont Public Radio that the clip where WCAX came from or why that was chosen.

MK Why is that?

WH It was College of Agriculture Extension Service and I don't recall that ever recurring to me back in the 1920's that that was the time that people were picking their call letters to tie in with not just taking them in alphabetical order as they came along but

MK And at that point there was still pretty much a wide open choice.

WH Uh huh.

MK A lot of options were available to choose from. That's interesting.

WH The W will identify, that's the national, W or C for the...

William Hall

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MK ?

WH As the all that class of United States licensed stations.

MK Right. That's really interesting. Tell me how did come that you got involved with the actual building, setting up the station then?

WH Well because, I had my own station. I had been operating there for I say, even as a junior in high school they had invited me as probably an example of what little boys can do with radio in selling it to the public. I'd been helping with the building and construction of the station and was operating it the night that it made history by being the first amateur a spark heard in France during, again that was while I was still in high school. Then by the time I was in college, I was turned into getting very much involved, but I had also gotten involved with the American Radio Relay Leagues. Was it the, I forget now what the title was but the assistant district manager, something, covering the State of Vermont and making contact with the various clubs and individuals around the State. In other words I was just very heavily involved with radio and the people who had started it, the Class of '21, '22 were out by that time and I got asked simply got asked would I be willing to try to put a station together the one the gentleman involved with the not on the staff, but very much involved a graduate of UVM very much involved with the college and its what they were trying to do and with the Agricultural College in particular I guess had already, they had already gotten started by buying a lot of the elements that would go into it. They gave me a copy of a book on radio telephony to use as sort of a guide as to what to put together for a set and sort of turned me loose. It was fascinating.

MK How long?

WH The better part of the summer.

MK Did you have any problems getting any of the parts to work? Did it work right away?

WH Well the usual. The usual headaches that you have and again putting up with the help and cooperation of everybody around town and as far as that goes. The Roy Buchannon who is the professor of power was a lot of help in putting things together. But so far as the

radio information, radio frequency information, there wasn't anyone on the staff actually that really knew anything about it.

MK Were there Federal regulations in place at that point to tell you what perimeters you are not to operate within or?

WH Yea, as to they were not nearly as tight as they were later just how precisely you had to be on the frequency that was assigned to you. And the amount of power you could radiate and so forth. You had to spell out what it was. You had to have licensed operators to run it. And again the—there ha been one of the was it, what the formal government group was that had charge of that was visiting here in Burlington the year before and gave a lot of us a chance to take examinations to get commercial operators licenses which I and uh and quite a few of the others did while I was still a freshman at college.

MK So there was no shortage of operators available for station.

WH So we got licensed commercial operators available.

MK Where w the broadcast antenna—and the transmitter— where were they located ?

WH Alright that, there was a World War I shack, wooden shack behind the Radium Science Hall and that housed the, there were a couple of classrooms and an electrical machinery laboratory there in that building and then there were three doors along one side of the radio shack. The radio club had the center section, separate entrance. Pot bellied stoves heating it and so forth. We put up windmill tower, about 40 foot high windmill tower with about a 20 foot pipe extension on top of that, getting up something over 60 feet for one end of an antenna. About half way between that and the engineering building, east of that structure and...

MK That was...I was just trying to imagine sitting at a council, having a pot bellied stove there behind you.

WH Yea, that's about it.

William Hall

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MK That's great. Do you remember the very first broadcast when you signed on the air?

WH That we put on there?

MK Yea.

WH Well that again is fairly well described in that free press article trying to get everything going. We are using one of the rooms that are, by that time using one of the, we put the radio station into one of the rooms which was had been part of the laboratory. Used part of the room, one of the classrooms as a place to do the broadcasting, the microphone and a separate room from where the equipment was. Someone unearthed a piano and got in there.

MK For this radio audience, now can you describe what that first broadcast was like? Did it start off with Star Spangled Banner or?

WH Well let's see. I don't remember first hand the details of that sort of thing but as that newspaper article reports they had the ROTC band available and parts of it anyway to help them get going with things of that sort.

MK Did this station broadcast every day or were there just?

WH No, it was only about once a week or one evening a week as I remember was all there were trying to do at the offset. Then very shortly a highly entertaining situation arose where they wanted to broadcast a concert I think it was that was being put on over in the one of the rooms in the old mill at that time and could we get wires over there and make connections to broadcast that. It just happened that about, within the week before that we had a very stilted (?) letter from Dean Hills pointing out that their regulations that the college building should not be used except for classes and so forth. Weekends when I see to it, that the radio station did not operate over the weekends ~~and~~ the like, on Saturdays and Sundays. This presumably for the benefit of the people that wanted to listen to the broadcast and so forth. Instead we said heck if we can't operate-can't use the building and operate the radio station-I don't see how we can broadcast that program. We, the whole radio club was kind of up in arms about the rule. We'd been doing everything we could to help out people

with radio receivers which were perfectly, which had perfectly horrible tuners in them. I'll admit that our spark transmitter didn't radiate all over the world. The lighting, you'd light up the lights in the gym across the other side of the campus and things like that. It was a disturbing influence but the CW radio transmitter was alright and if people had good receivers they wouldn't have been bothered by it. So we did continue to help people around town fix up their sets so that keep us out, as well as get the stations in they wanted to hear.

MK You'd get calls from people who said they had a problem and you'd go out to them and make some changes?

WH We made quite a plan to advertising both in the papers and by radio that if they did have trouble with the interference from the amateurs station, for goodness sake, get in touch with us and see what we can do to help them out.

MK Now when you say the amateur station you mean the not?

WH No, not WCAX, LARY.

MK So it was the amateur station that was lighting up lights in the gym and?

WH Yea, the same one that was, they had, at that time, see they had I think there was technically a one kilowatt limit. There is 1,000 watt on the power that you could use at, in an amateur radio station. The time we were the first amateur spark heard in France, we were blowing fuses, blowing 60 amp fuses which meant at least 6 kilowatts, 6 or 7 kilowatts in the transmitter.

MK So *if you were* technically within legal perimeters they wouldn't bring you in.

WH Well yes, well as to what we were actually radiating, goodness knows what the actual power that we radiated was.

MK Right. Now when, okay this is probably clear, but if I went back and listened to the tape, so when you were asked to broadcast this concert in the old mill that was, CAX that was asked to broadcast?

William Hall
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WH Yea. WCAX is the broadcast. The same people that had just been told not to use that building for radio...

MK For radio.

WH For radio period.

MK For radio at all.

Laughing

MK Was it the administration that wanted you to broadcast the concert?

WH Yea, oh yes. As I said we made peace. Dean Brody came to our rescue, helped come to our rescue as I remember it. A little bit more sympathetic to his needs and we were quite happy to keep off the air during, certainly to keep the spark transmitter and in general to keep off the air during the reasonable hours during the evening.

MK So what were the broadcast hours then? Did it come on later at night?

WH What WCAX was broadcasting that would be during, what would be the during prime time nowadays. Referred to as prime time now is the time that they ordinarily would be on during the evening or early evening hours. We would keep from operating the radio station at that time and maybe start again and operate during the day if we could just without bothering the people too much for testing and though I, get it going again maybe after 10:30 at night doing the amateur work.

MK What was the response in the community to having a broadcast station on the air in Vermont? Did you hear a lot? Did you get a lot of letters? Did you just hear about it?

WH Yea, again that, one of the things that I do remember there so much of that being the same as amateur activity of sending cards, acknowledging when you had heard someone or when you communicated with them and so forth and we had cards WCAX had cards coming in from all around. I forget now just how far away but again the some records of that — Western New York State, Connecticut, around quite, I think some even farther away than that.

MK So the coverage area was ^{pretty} good.

William Hall

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WH Well that incidently does not mean just because you get up in those places does not mean that you cover the whole state of Vermont.

MK I know even now that I drive around a mountain and I lose some of what ever I was listening to.

WH Yea.

MK Sure. It is real interesting. I'm trying to imagine myself as a radio listener in those days and now when you scan up and down the dial, there is something every you know every little increment. You hit another station. But it must have been quite different then. You had a lot of blank space in the middle probably.

WH Well, you'd be lucky if you heard anything. I can remember when again still during these years that we are talking about while I was still in high school, just with a crystal receiver, before I had any vacuum tubes involved hearing I think KDRA I think was about the first one we heard. But the excitement of hearing that at home here in Burlington that and the one of the other early ones, the General Electric station in I think in Albany was to hear some of those from outside. Then to have the radio station here in the state really was quite an addition.

MK I'm sure. It must have been quite exciting for. Did you get cards that you remember at least from farmers who, who a were relying on some of the agricultural service messages.

WH I did not. There wasn't nearly as much of that after the regular programming started. There were still cards coming in. I was not around to know for sure what happened after that first year of operation, but apparently they did get quite a lot of feedback from around the state as to kept going for around 6 or 7 years for they finally decided that it would be better to let it go commercial.

MK ^{With}
_____ ? _____ ?
a sort of full-time schedule and all ...

WH Yes.

MK In the early broadcast days, were there ever efforts to try to broadcast live sports events or anything like that? Baseball games or?

WH Yes that sort of thing was done quite a bit. I don't recall specific details of at all well of any of that now, but the sort of things that would be on, but the whole thing of making arrangements for commercial operation I think that the telephone company with the station they are operating in New York City were offering anyone that wanted to come in and advertise their wares or put on big speeches to the public, things like that, could make arrangements to get time on the station. It never did get a formal broadcasting license. I don't know whether KDKA was about the first one that actually had a formal license as a public broadcasting service and there are only a couple of hundred of them in all in the country by the time WCAX went on the air.

MK Would of course you weren't, were you living in the Burlington area when the station went commercial?

WH No, I was not.

MK I was wondering about the role of advertising in those days.

Laughing

MK How that was seen.

WH I don't know. For that sort of thing the gentleman who is running WCAX television now was the, was involved from the onset with the station when it went commercial. It was the chap who owned the Daily News was the one that took over the station. Red Martin was his step-son. Stewart Martin was now the WCAX broadcast station was involved in probably could commute a lot more.

MK That's interesting, okay.

WH And also again I've got the collection of newspapers that Dad collected and sent me over the years keeping up in the history of the station as it was taken over by the Daily News and expanding and getting more power and bigger antennas and commercial...

MK How did that make you feel to see where that had gone? One started out with the radio crowd.

WH It was a good healthy growth I would say.

William Hall

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- MK Oh, I think it would be. I think it would make me feel pretty proud to that something that I'd been involved in like that to have taken off that way. That's really nice.
- WH Yea, some of the articles in the Daily News and the Free Press I find almost embarrassing to have around.
- MK That's funny. The reason I had asked you about whether they had broadcast any sports events like in that first year with the station as long as you were involved with them.
- WH Yea, we did try to broadcast without good lines so you have a live mike at the baseball game that was a total flop. They did successfully broadcast basketball games and things like that from UVM at that time. I was thinking more of the question how much was were you hearing and that sort of thing on the general radio
- MK Oh no.
- WH WCAX did broadcast basketball games and things like that quite a bit of the time.
- MK How did they, you mentioned not having, not being able to have a live mic for instance from ... how did that work?
- WH We could do that. We could have a live mic at the, made arrangements to get a live mike over at the where the basketball games were going on just right there not too far from the station.
- MK Well I remember hearing other stories about early experiences in radio not here in Vermont but at other situations where there wouldn't be a live mike set up for like a baseball game for instance and having to wait to get reports of what the scores were and kind of making up the plays to go with those scores or something and having to almost dramatize over the air.
- WH Uh huh.
- MK The announcer for some, I guess the operator or the announcer trying to make that come alive for an audience.
- WH That was what I was trying to do here. When trying to broadcast a baseball game from Sentinel Field and I

was the one trying to do the relaying at the station and I was not up to that, that part of it. We did have some of the students and some of the staff were very good at being able to talk.

MK How did it work with somebody down at the game and calling on the phone?

WH Somebody at the game and trying to pass the word along what was going on. It would be much better to have waited until afterward and let them tell all the excitement that went on then try to keep it going during the basketball games. They were a little bit different. You could get, we could get a live mic over into the gym and...

MK So the audience, then your audience could hear the audience at the game?

WH Yea, so you could hear all those things.

MK Sure.

WH Which is the big part of the live broadcasting.

MK You must have, in growing up you must have had a lot of support from your parents for...

WH Yes.

MK getting involved in the radio, the amateur radioism. Really as a young boy.

WH They kind of turned me loose on that sort of thing starting in with some of the home childrens' kits along before the war.

MK Well I really enjoyed talking with you. I'm very glad you took the time. Thank you very much.

WH ^{60.2} enough.

MK I'd like to do one more thing which is just to get about a minute of the sound of the room just in case I need a little space to edit in any place to make the transition.