

Margaret McArthur
Peacham
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Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK Before I forget, could you just tell me the story of the Devil's Hill, the story of Devil's Hill as you're using it for the basis of the song.

MM Well the story of Devil's Hill was sent to me by Charlie Brown of the Fairbanks Museum and the somehow the ideas that this story came from a newspaper article in the Caledonian Record back in the last century. We're not sure, it just says perhaps, and it was perhaps sent by a man who had moved to Michigan. The story is and we've been able to date by the, by the names of the characters in this story that this whole thing probably happened around the turn of the century between the 18th and 19th century. Probably 1803 or maybe 1799 that several prominent citizens, the most prominent citizens of Peacham were out one night in the fall of the year drinking potato whiskey at a tavern owned by David Elkins, a tavern called the Red House when and Simeon Walker was there. And at Simeon Walker's farm, five years earlier, there had come an old man, an elderly man whose was haggard and worn looking and Simeon Walker gave him permission to build a shop on Walker's land. The man claimed to be a mechanic. And he built a shop, but he never, he lived in the shop and he worked in the shop and strange lights were seen coming from the chimney at night, strange sounds and he was very secretive. He never talked to anybody about what he was doing in the shop or where he had come from. He said he had no relatives. He said he was the fourth cousin of the wandering jew when people really pressed him to see where he'd come from and there was gossip about him that he was an alchemist. That he was making a process to change silver into gold, that he was a counterfeiter as they called it in this story a shover of the queer, counterfeit money. That he himself said that he was trying to make a machine that would be a machine of perpetual motion. And some of the children called him a wizard. And some people had said he had sold his soul to the devil. These four men and more, but four men prominent citizens were mentioned by name and who were actual citizens of Peacham at that time in drinking one night saw, heard a clap of thunder, saw a flash of lightening. They saw an apparition fly from old Myers direction of his cabin over to the bog, the Peacham Bog, and fall into the bog with a hiss and Captain Bailey swore on, made an oath that it was a figure of a person holding a blazing brand. At the same time the top of the mountain that was near the bog erupted into flames and it burnt so severely that nothing was left but granite for evermore and ever since then that mountain has been called, or eminence as they call it in the old story has been called

Devil Hill. When Simon Walker returned home, he found that Myers cabin where Myers lived and worked was totally destroyed by fire and Walker claimed that Myers was never seen again. So the conjecture was that this clap of lightening hit both the, both Devil's Hill, both mountain, Myers cabin and that something flew between Myers cabin and a bog that was near Devil's Hill. And the person who wrote this sent it back to Vermont probably 1890 we were able to date before 1890, because he mentioned he, the person who wrote the account, said there's no one in Peacham with the exception of Leonard Johnson who would remember anything about this old story and Leonard Johnson died in 1890. So sometime before that this story was sent back to Vermont from Michigan by an old man in Michigan or an old woman. We don't know whether it was a man or woman who wrote it. And since I was invited to come to Peachman as Artist in Residence, Charlie Brown sent me this story from the Fairbanks Museum and I've been thinking about it before I came here and now that I've been in Peacham just one day, but been able to look up things in the history of Peacham, um that collaborate that these men actually lived here makes it seem like a genuine folk tale of that period rather than something that was made up later. So what else can I say about this?

MK Let's talk a little bit about the process of writing the songs with the kids.

MM The process of writing the songs with the kids ideally would, I would have a couple of weeks, I would have a week to work with them reading the accounts. Reading this story over several times and getting them to furnish a lot of the phrases. But when I only have one week that's just five meetings with them. Before, I started working with them just yesterday, so I think that they've absorbed a lot of the history. I like to just feel, well, if they can't write the whole song with me, they are at least absorbing a lot of history about the town, seeing how a song is written, getting a feeling of what Peacham was like in 1800 or 1790. It was settled in 1776 and they all know that very well. A lot of the houses, Jonathan Elkins' house, and Jonathan Elkins was one of the people who was at this potato rum drinking spree, his house stands right here by the school, so they have a good, they have a feeling, getting a feeling what it might have been like. Then I read them, Kathy, their teacher read them the story yesterday. It's very hard to read because it's a bad copy, but and we talked about it yesterday and I asked them to think last night about different phrases that could be used. And I would like to do that day after day and do the song day after day, but I wrote three verses,

with things that we talked about yesterday and left the two most exciting verses to write today with them and try to draw phrases from them and use phrases that are in the story. I made up the tune before we even started any of it because, the tune and the chorus, I thought I had to bring that much just to have a frame work to work with in this very short time. So more than being creative on their part, it's trying to, trying to incorporate them in the folk process in a way, thinking about things that used to happen and keep indicating that it's not a true story, it's a folk tale. It has to be a folk tale because obviously there's no way that this is a true story. And it's a way of sort of integrating folk lore with history and with school work and with living in a gorgeous town like this. Trying to just pull all those things together in a very short time and also try to have a nice song, nice end song that they'll be proud of having taken part of, part in the making of it.

MK Now is this, how long have you been doing the artist in the schools sessions?

MM Just a couple of years. I've, ever since the Vermont Council on the Arts began, I've been concertizing in schools, but I didn't really think about being an Artist in Residence until about two years ago and I was able to, well, the first time I did anything like this was last spring, the spring of '87 when Kathy Link in Shaftsbury, the Arts and Basics program, did with her students interviews of fifteen older residents of Shaftsbury and then she asked me to come and do songs on these interviews. Well, there again, I had too short ~~of~~ time. I only had six days and it wasn't long enough. So it meant that I had to do again most of the work, although the kids had done the interviews, they hadn't sifted through the interviews to pick out what they wanted to make the songs about. I had to do all that, but in the end I worked only with the sixth graders, so I did have six days with just a small group of kids and I worked all day and I worked in small groups with three students very extensively. So we were able, they were able to really be in on every phrase of the song. One or another of them was, not all of them, but a few of them. So they felt very proud of that. So I did that with Shaftsbury, then I was in Sherburne this fall and I did four songs about historic Sherburne and there was a lot of history available, but that was a whole different kind of town. Shaftsbury has the oldest industry in Vermont. The square, making of the carpenter squares, Eagle Square Company in Shaftsbury. Well, in Killington, you have the mountain which was very important as a tourist spot for summer tourism in the victorian era

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and then became, as we know, very important tourist spot now. So those were different kinds of songs, come out of different towns. So it's really only a year that I've been writing songs with kids. It seems like I did one other one too, but I can't think what it is at the moment. I guess those are the main ones.

MK That's really interesting. And you wrote the tune?

MM Yea, I wrote the tune. In Shaftsbury, since we did seven songs in Shaftsbury, I wrote some of the tunes and I used old folk tunes for others. But I just, and really you don't write a tune, you probably heard the tune in some old song and you've just taken the tune to,, I guess the first one I did was really for the teacher's meeting in October of '86 when I was asked to be part of that teacher's meeting, I collaborated with Mary Azarian and set her alphabet to an old tune, the tune of the Lumberman's Alphabet and made up poems to go with her book of alphabet, so that was a first. That was the Mary Azarian Alphabet song.

MK Is there a tape of that anywhere?

MM No, not yet.

MK What a shame, there should be. Is that going to be part of the record?

MM Yes, it will definitely be part of the record.

MK That's good.

MM Because it's a wonderful song and her posters are in all the schools in Vermont so it makes it a very interesting thing to go into a school and say well here we can sing about these pictures that you have on the wall. So that, I think that was the first thing I did of this sort, but they are all quite different aren't they. Each thing I've done has been quite different.

MK , I was noticing that you had some groups of the kids break out into various groups and then you have the ones that are really interested and they're right there, right with you.

MM Yes.

MK And then you have the others are the fringe kind of goofing around a little bit, but paying attention enough to know that they are interested too, they are just going

to be a little more a little less intense about it. Do you ever have a hard time holding the kids interest or was this pretty typical in a way. They really seem...

MM This is typical. No I never have trouble holding kids interest. For some reason, I don't know exactly what. I shouldn't say never, but very rarely. You know, folk songs are so interesting and especially as you could see with all each of the songs that I was teaching them that they are historic. One was about a boy who lived in Barnet, which is the next town to Peacham who went to Waterford, which is where their music teacher is from and so if a song is about somebody they can, I can make them interested in, then I feel really good. So it's not only just teaching a song, but it's teaching the background of the song. How do those songs come into being and what do we still know about how? how? for instance that what is fun about this song 50 years ago. It doesn't tell a good story, but it just tells a lot of, gives a lot of imagery. I think that's the thing about the songs that I sing and about most folk songs or at least the ones I'm interested in. They have such a powerful mental imagery and kids are still up for seeing that where adults really have lost the capacity to first learn a song in one singing. Don't you think it's amazing that they learned these songs when I came yesterday. I've seen them only one day. By Friday, they are going to know them very well. Adults can no longer see the things that are happening in the songs. So these songs would be very boring to a grown-up audience unless I was able to somehow capture their interest or some adults are still kids, are still unjaded, I should say.

MK It was really nice to see how involved they could be. You know this ^{is} video age generation and all.

MM Yea, I'm glad you're here. Of course this is a rural school. This might not be nearly as successful in a city school. I haven't ever worked in a city school. I would have to do a whole different tack I suppose. I don't know. It's nice to be in a rural school where there are two grades in one room. All these kids are lucky. Vermont students are very lucky to still be in a rural atmosphere. But I have worked in Tucson. I have worked in Tucson for five years now, this will be my fifth year. It's a big city and I have no trouble capturing their interest either. And actually I've written songs in Tucson about the desert and about things that have happened there, so actually this is what I've done in Vermont what I've told you but I actually started doing this in Tucson the first year I was there. Five years

ago, I was in a junior high school of very tough kids. They were, I don't mean they were just tough in the classroom, they were actually rough tough. The janitor said he'd never seen a group of kids like that and he'd been working as a custodian for years. And I wrote a song about something that happened in that part of the desert and it captured them so that they learned the longest British ballad you can imagine and I heard them get off the bus screaming in the morning, "Oh! I just learned King John and the Bishop of Canterbury," which is a very long ancient British ballad. Another one would get off the bus screaming, "Oh! I just learned another long ballad," so I think folk ballads, folk lore is, it's a catalyst really. It can still be used as a catalyst, but it's only because I'm so interested in it. If I were, you know if I were just teaching music and trying to use this, if I didn't know it by heart, then there is no way I would expect them to know it by heart and a lot of, so that's the important part I think is the oral tradition still being effective, you know. People say, "Do you want me to write this, why don't we write this down?" "No, let's not write this down. You can write it down after I'm gone." So...

MK Do you see any follow-ups with any of these groups?

MM Um...

MK Or have you heard about for instance the group down in Shaftsbury, are they doing something this year that builds on what you did with the group last year?

MM I haven't heard. I do hear follow-up in Tucson that the song that I wrote with some third graders the following year after the this junior high school experience changed a young girls life and that she became a very good student and she just changed her whole attitude toward school. She became proud of her Mexican heritage and I have heard that the whole school is proud of the song and that especially it gave her some pride and that made me feel very good. And every time I go back to Tucson I see this child. Of course she is now getting older and older, but it did make me feel very good. It wasn't follow-up for the whole school, but it's waves that I got back from it. But I hope the follow-up will be that the kids themselves will just have a different way of looking at things. See something that's interesting and think oh that is interesting. Read something in the paper because I sing for the Mary Sheminsky I Love You, which is a song I wrote of true event in the Brattleboro area and maybe they'll see something in the paper and think about it more than just sort of skimming over it. Think "Oh that's sort of

like an old ballad. That could have been a ballad or it could be made into a ballad, or just the idea of a story in song or story in verse or even just a story which is sort of lost sometime. The people just skim through everything and never the stories don't jump out at them anymore. So I hope that that's the follow-up that the kids I've worked out with will see stories as an integral part of life or expression or just general absorption.

MK A story is different, just thinking about a story, it's different than, as you said, in most of what we read, most of what as people talk about, things, they don't think in terms of stories anymore.

MM Uh huh.

MK And I don't know when that changes for most people. My kids still think story because they're little.

MM Yea, and maybe you can just foster that all along and forever and they'll always think stories.

MK Some of my four year old's favorite bedtime stories are tell me about when you got the cat and tell me about when — and he has opened my eyes to the idea that these can be stories because to me it was a very quick incident. It didn't happen over a long period of time. It was one event and you know and he would say tell me a story about... and I'd think gee it doesn't have a plot and I realized through talking with him that, hey, it was a story.

MM It is a story. Yea.

MK You're right.

MM Well that's, I think my dad really fostered that because he tells stories. And he tells stories about when he was a boy. And he always start it when I was a boy and I always listened and I hear the same stories, he still tells these stories when I was a boy and the last time I visited my folks my sister's son, who is about 14, was sitting in the corner with my dad and I could see my dad was telling him a story and I said oh that's great. There's my nephew and he's listening to a story that my dad's telling him. Probably it comes a lot from that. I never had thought about it before. He doesn't sing, but he does tell stories. He had great stories because he worked in as a cook in the cowboy outfits out west and then he was a forester and he was cruising timber and you know he's always coming home and even when I was a little girl coming home and he'd been struck by a rattle snake in

his boot and he'd always tell me about it and you could see where he was struck too. So I kind of had a very dramatic childhood growing up with him. So...

I used the form of a broad side ballads of the last century to start this song when it says "Come all ye who live in Peacham, I'll have you listen well" concerning the stories that all the old folks tell, that's the way all the broad side ballads of the last century started "Come all ye", or "Listen to me" or "I'll have you know" or "Come here", "As I roved out," so the first two lines, we definitely are in a category of the broad side ballads, so it is a contemporary broad side ballad of something that happened back in broad side ballad days.

MK Now they are going to be singing this song "Pucker Street" is it?

MM And "Pucker Street" is a song that was written by Timothy Hazeltine in 1825. It's in the history of the Town of Waterford without its tune, but the tune is very interesting to that because a man from Waterford moved to Buffalo in the last century and when he moved to Buffalo, he learned, he studied music. He learned how to write music and he wrote a letter back to Waterford to a relative saying look what I've learned how to do and he wrote down one of the verses to "Pucker Street". It's a different verse, it's the one about Old Uncle Cheney Has Got Him a Mill. It's not very dramatical. That verse comes from that letter. It's not in the town history and the tune comes from that letter and I found that letter in Helen Flander's papers that were given to me after she died and I didn't know the rest of the song, but I wrote to the town clerk of Waterford who put me in touch with a woman named Eugenia Powers. She wrote to me and told me that the verses, the other verses were in the town history. I wrote to Wes Cate at the Historical Society and immediately got back a xerox of the words and then it turned out as I read the letter again, Jean Powers was the one who had sent the letter to Flanders in the first place with the tune in it. So all of these things came full circle to get that song back to its proper tune and now to be singing it here in Peacham where Barnet is the next town over is very interesting.

MK How does the title "Pucker Street"? —

MM How did, well in the town history it said maybe because there are so many choke cherries in Waterford that people's mouths puckered up or maybe there was a woman who lived there, who was so stuck up that she didn't associate

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with the other, with the common people so they called it Pucker Street because she lived on that street. So we don't know how it got the term Pucker Street. People who live there now, no longer call it Pucker Street, but Jean Powers said it was known that it had been called that in the past and she didn't know why either.

MK Interesting.