

“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.

Ben Collins
July 9, 1981

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG I'm talking with Ben Collins for the WNCV Barre History Series. And it's July 9, 1981, Barre, Vermont. So Ben, what can you tell me about Socialist Hall?

BC Socialist Hall or to be more correct, the Socialist Party Hall on Granite Street in Barre I think is probably one of the most interesting buildings in the entire city. The reason that I corrected the name is that for years and years the Barre Daily Times refused to refer to the building as the Old Socialist Party Hall. In fact, referred to it only as The Labor Hall. I don't know why they were afraid of the Socialists because going back to as far back as 1898 the Socialist party was organized in Barre and that was a year or two before the Socialist Party was organized in this country. And that fact itself reflects a little bit on the nature of some of the Italian immigrants into, into Barre in the late 1800's and early 1900's. But the hall was built about 1899 and many of the Italian colony in the city contributed either money or if they didn't have money, they worked on the building itself. It was constructed on the site of a round granite shed that had been owned by the Jones Brothers. And that granite shed also had a, had a horse suite. The building today is occupied by Vermont Tomato Pack, but it still has the granite arm and hammer over the, over the entrance. The building was operated by socialists in town up until 1936. At that time, they offered it, the building to a variety of labor unions in town asking them only to pick up what little is remaining on the mortgage. However, there were no takers. And I think that reflects the prevailing attitude in the community at that time. I think one of the most interesting bits of history associated with the building was in 1912 when there was a major strike in Lawrence, Mass. in the textile industry, it was organized by the anarchists and there were some strong ties between the anarchists in Barre which was really a small group and, and the Socialists with those who were involved in the strike leadership in Lawrence. At that time, the group associated with the Socialist Hall agreed to receive and care for approximately 50 children of the strikers. And they had as many as 350 people at a meeting in the Socialist Hall to organize this effort. And a couple of people from Barre went down to Lawrence and they brought the children up to Barre on a special car in a train. They were met at the Depot by bands from Waterbury and Bethel, as well as in town and they marched up to City Hall and through the park and then back to the Socialist Hall where they were given physicals and lunch and then they all had their pictures taken and the pictures were mailed to their parents in Lawrence as a demonstration that everybody was okay and they stayed,

excuse me, stayed in town for some time. Some people tell me they were sent to school with little signs on showing that this was a Lawrence child and their name and so on and so forth. But it was really, it was really a community effort. They had a benefit performance at the Opera House and even the mayor contributed some money towards towards this effort. So that there was at that time quite a good deal of sympathy within the community for that particular project. And it's interesting that Barre took as many as 50 because the City of Philadelphia at that time only took about 150. If you compare populations of Barre and Philadelphia you'll see how disproportionate Barre's effort was.

MG Okay, we're back on.

BC The Barre radicals if you want to call them that were really plugged into a network that reached across the country and even into Italy. As an example of that, in 1909, Emma Goldman who was a rather noted anarchist at the time or radical if you will, spent several weeks in Barre. And in one of her books, she talks about her efforts to, unsuccessful efforts to get a haul in Burlington where the mayor and other officials were successful in blocking any space for, any space for her to talk. And she said that a group of socialists in Barre came to her rescue and she spoke, spent quite a bit of time in Barre. As a matter of fact, she tells rather an amazing story. She claims she was finally run out of town and the official version of why she was run out of town was because she supposedly during one of her talks said, "Bless the hand that struck down the Maine." And of course that was the battleship that was sunk, that helped precipitate the Spanish-American War. She said in fact the reality was that she was, she during her stay in Barre ran across the Mayor and the Chief of Police dead drunk in, in an infamous boarding house kitchen. You know, boarding houses are really a very important of the Social History of, of the Italian colony in Barre. The life expectancy of a granite cutter because of silicosis was really quite brief. And many, many, many women found themselves widowed at a very early age. And the way that they were able to make ends meet was by taking in, taking in boarders and of course a very important part of, of their diet was, was wine. And this led to some complications especially during prohibition. As a matter of fact, some people say that the greatest economic loss in Barre during the flood of 1927 was all of the damage that was done to the wine cellars along, along the, along the river. And it's, thinking about Emma Goldman and calling her a radical and an anarchist to get a sense of perspective, it's sort of amusing to note that

she was jailed in 1916 for having advocated birth control. So you see, there really are double standards of what, what we mean by what's radical today and what was seen as radical then. Another incident that many people prefer not to remember about the Socialist Hall, which by the way I don't know whether it was done by the Barre Daily Times, but certainly elements of the community used to refer to the building as the "Bucket of Blood." Now that referred more to liveliness of the dances and socials that they had there than than the incident I'm about to tell you about which is the shooting on the steps of Eria Corti who was Barre's most famous, one of Barre's most famous sculptures, granite sculptures. He was the one that did the panels on the Robert Burns Memorial and also assisted with the statue itself. But apparently in October of 1903, a person by the name of Giam Saroti was to speak in Barre. And he was a well-known Socialist organizer and lecturer and had said some very unkind things about the anarchists. And there was just a small group of anarchists in Barre and they were very much at odds with the Socialists. And the Socialists used to identify themselves by wearing red half ties, half bow ties. And the anarchists wore black half bow ties. If you look at some of the family portraits in town, you can get a clue as to some of the political leanings of some people's ancestors in town. A lot of people have really forgotten the significance of the different color of ties. Well anyhow, a man by the name of Alexander _____ was, came down to the hall to open it up and get ready for Mr. Saroti's lecture. And a few anarchists were on hand to heckle him and he got a little uptight and fired into the crowd, not aiming at anybody particular but I guess he felt he was given enough space. Well Corti was on the scene not because he was participating in the heckling by the anarchists, but he had been sent over by his mother to keep one of his relatives out of trouble. I won't mention the names because a lot, it's, a lot of people are still a little sensitive about that. But, so Arti himself when he got there, everybody cleared out because of the excitement and he was later found downstairs where there was a cooperative store that was operated by Social Club #2 which is the name of the organization that owned the building. And he was arrested for breach of peace and Mr. Gareto was ultimately charged and jailed for six years and the feeling was that really it was probably, the shooting was probably "justified", but according to one member of the jury, they had debated letting him off but they felt that they ought to incarcerate him for awhile just to let things cool down. The Socialist Hall in addition to

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being a meeting place, used for some of the things I've mentioned and for dances, also included a cooperative store and later on a bottling works and a bakery.

MG Can you tell me about the period in which there was a Socialist government in Barre or as I've heard it described as Socialist Government?

BC Well.

MG Wait a minute.

BC I don't think that it's realistic to characterize any government, municipal government within Barre's history as a Socialist government. Gordon I think was elected Mayor around World War I, was identified as a Socialist. But his main contribution was the construction of the auditorium which at that time was called Gordon's Folly, but that's not a very Socialistic kind of an investment for the community. There were, there were a lot of coalitions and various groupings within the municipal government. The Socialists by enlarge did not really participate very heavily in local politics. The area, Graniteville for example, later on and after World War I and the early '30's, we had several candidates for State office that ran as Socialists. They were not from Barre City itself. Part of the, part of the conflict between the anarchists and socialists related to their di-virgin views on World War I. The Socialists pretty much world wide opposed the war because they felt that it was working, putting working class people against each other for the benefit of the capitalists or the structure. The anarchists were in favor of the war by enlarge and their reasoning was that let the capitalists destroy each other and we'll pick up the pieces. That same kind of political thinking is prevalent in some quarters today. But as, as in terms of a straight socialists administration within Barre City government, I don't think it's accurate to say that it was a meaningful one.

MG It would like characterizing Bernie Sanders now as the Socialist Mayor of Burlington.

BC Well I think that's, that's more appropriate for Doonesbury than it is for (LAUGH) any political analysis.

MG Right, but it's that same kind of public statement that?

BC Yea.

MG Yea. What lead to the decline of the Socialists? You say the hall disappeared from their hands around 1935
_____ hands around then?

BC Well, you see the Italians that came over in the early, in the late 1800's and the early 1900's came from Northern Italy. There's a long history in Northern Italy of anti-clericalism, long history of, of splitter politics. Remember Italy wasn't unified as a nation until about the time out Civil War. And most of, the reason I call it the Italian Colony is that the people that came over, the granite carvers and cutters that came over early on, saw themselves as a colony and not as part of the community. They felt that they were going to be here temporarily, that, and they maintained very close ties with, with their home communities in Italy. And interesting aspect of that, and I haven't been able to really get a very good fix on this. A lot of, Mussolini, we think of Mussolini only in terms of the second world war and maybe the late '30's. But Mussolini came to power in 1922. And when he took over, Italy needed investment capital and he offered a very high rate of interest for the time and a lot of money from Barre was invested. And it was a good investment until, within just a few years Mussolini said, "You can't take that money out of the, out of Italy." So a lot of people today still have investments in Italy that they have to go to Italy to enjoy. But again going back to the, to the politics of a lot of the Italians that came to town during World War II and earlier there was some discussion whether or not there should be an anti-fascist organization in Barre. But that was, that never came to pass because every, those that might feel under a political cloud felt that their history and their participation in the community was so well understood that there was no need for that because they were anti-fascist by definition. And other, the anti-clericalism came out in a very interesting way and it had a very dramatic exposure in the middle '30's. A Barre, a son of Barre, by the name of Arlow Charles Poletti, graduated from Spaulding High School and went to Harvard and became very active in New York State politics. And in the middle '30's he bumped the then Lieutenant Governor on the, on the ticket, the Democratic ticket headed by Hubert Lehman and Mr. Poletti advertized himself as a Baptist. Now the Baptist and the Methodist maintained missions in the Italian colony in what was then known as, as North Barre which is the section down by where the granite, where the Socialist Hall is located. Well Poletti apparently this was a rather controversial move within the Democratic party in New York and someone came up to Barre and they discovered that Poletti who thought himself Baptist had

indeed been baptized as an infant in the Catholic Church in Barre. And this created quite a, quite a sensation because of the Catholics in New York made great play of this. And Poletti was somewhat embarrassed. But his experience does reflect what happened. Many times the anti-clerical Italians would, would come to Barre. They might baptize their children in the Catholic Church because they were uncertain as to how repressive society might be and they wanted to play it safe. Or they would get a plot in the Catholic cemetery. And the Catholics at this time didn't have anybody, any priest that spoke Italian. And then they would, these two, the Baptist Mission and the Methodist Mission were very active in the Italian community. Helped with the socialization process and provided educational opportunities for the whole family and recreational opportunities. And so it is perfectly understandable that, that Poletti who had been baptized as a Baptist you know as a young, around eleven or twelve had no, had never been told that he'd already been baptized in the Catholic Church.

MG Ben, what's your background? Are you from Barre?

BC No, I'm from New York State. I came to Vermont for two years in 1954 and one of my first, I came as a reporter for the Burlington Free Press. And I used to cover the Barre City Council. It was one of my early assignments and it struck me then that, Wow!, this community is the most cosmopolitan community in Vermont and yet the awareness of some of this rich history didn't seem to be very prevalent.