

Jennifer Post  
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Mark Greenberg  
Interviewer

MG Alright, it is January 4, 1989 in Middlebury College of the Flanders Collection speaking with Jennifer Post. Let's, first of all Jennifer, let me get your title straight so I can properly identify you. You are:

JP Well I am Curator of the Helen Hartness Flanders Ballad Collection and the Vermont Archive of Traditional Music.

MG Okay. Who was Helen Hartness Flanders?

JP Helen Hartness Flanders was a woman who lived in Central Vermont. She lived in Springfield, Vermont. Her father was Governor of Vermont in the 1920's, Governor Hartness and she, her, her husband was Ralph Flanders who later in the 1940's became Senator of Vermont. She was a poet, a writer, and a patron of the arts and had a particular interest in music. She did write poetry and it was probably for that reason that she was contacted by the Vermont Commission on Country Life to begin to explore the poetry and song in Vermont during the 1930's.

MG What was the Vermont Commission on Country Life?

JP It was a commission that was appointed by the Governor to search for country roots to look back into the 19th century for roots of the traditions in Vermont. I didn't say that very well, sorry.

MG Say it again.

JP (LAUGH) The Vermont Commission on Country Life was a, an organization that was appointed by the Governor of Vermont. From my understanding, it was made up of representatives from a variety of arts and humanities, occupations. The particular group that Helen Hartness Flanders worked with was a group of poets and writers and headed by a man named Mr. Peach over in Norwich, Vermont. And they were asked to search for some of the traditional poetry and music within the State of Vermont.

MG Do you know what the particular reason for convening this Commission at that time was?

JP I really don't. I can't really answer that, although I would certainly imagine that a reason for convening a commission like that would be the fact that the media had developed to the point where people were becoming more and more aware of the loss of some of the traditional arts in Vermont. The loss of the song traditions, many of the oral traditions in Vermont. And so I think that they felt that, that by gathering this material together, they might

be able to hang onto it a little bit longer. And one of their goals was to put the material that they collected into print. And in fact after the first year of research that Helen Flanders was involved in, she did publish a book, "Vermont Folk Songs and Ballads."

MG She began her research, she was called upon in 1930, is that correct?

JP That's right.

MG We're trying to peg each of these programs with a particular year so that would probably be the most logical one.

JP Uh huh.

MG Okay. What did, how did she go about doing this?

JP My understanding is that one of the first things that she did was to place advertisements in the newspaper, both advertisements and to write editorials. I guess in fact the advertisements that she did were in the form of editorials in which she asked people in a variety of communities in Vermont whether they knew of anyone or knew any of the old songs. And as this method for collecting developed, she began to include songs themselves and to include full texts of songs and then to say, "Does anybody know a song like this?" or "Has anyone heard this?" And she received many many many letters from people throughout the State. And I think that this method was so successful that she began then to expand into other areas including outside of Vermont. She, I'm sure as all of us who collect do, rely to some extent on friends and friends of friends and the web expanded and expanded. And she did very very early enlist the help of a man named George Brown in 1930 who at that time was part of the Springfield Orchestra. And she, as a patron of this orchestra, knew of his ability, musical ability and knew that he would be able to take down musical transcription as people were singing. And so she asked him to spend a period of time with her working on this project. She worked, Helen Flanders worked primarily in the Springfield area in the early years and he worked in the southern part of the State. Most of our notes from that period of time have his notations from Brattleboro, Townsend, that area. And most of her notations are from the Springfield area.

MG Do you know what her method would be and how she was with the people that she collected from, how did she present herself, what was the situation like?

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JP The interesting thing about the materials that we have from this period, in fact all of the recordings that we have in the Flanders Collection is that we don't have any of the conversations. Today folklorists at the music colleges going out into the field would record conversations, would record silences. I'm sorry I have to get this.

MG Record the sounds in the room? (LAUGH)

JP Right. (LAUGH) Tapes stopping. Um, it says, "At the music colleges would record silences and would record whatever is happening" and in the process of doing that would certainly be gathering contextual data. During the 1930's and even until probably 1950, 1960 for some collectors, what the collectors were interested in exclusive was the item itself, was the song, was the story. And so all Helen Flanders collected was the name of the person, the date, the fact that she was collecting for the Flanders Ballad Collection and then the song. Very occasionally we will have a conversation in which the person might say, "Yes, I learned the song from my father," or "My family lived in Canada." But we have very very little information. So for that reason, we don't have information on what her methodology was. We have very few field notes of hers which is very surprising. But for whatever reason, they're just not here, not available. So in terms of a methodology, I can't help you. In terms of expanding her knowledge and her method for collecting, she also very early became involved with a man. Let me start that again because it sounds (LAUGH). Very early she contacted a man named, Phillips Barry, down in Boston, down in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was a very highly regarded scholar in ballad literature. In fact, he today is still highly regarded. And it was with his help that she began to look very carefully for very particular types of songs in Vermont and songs which have often been considered some of the oldest ballads from the British Isles.

MG And it was a surprise to her and to Barry and others that these ballads were found?

JP I think that the scholarly community was surprised that that there were so many ballads in New England. The southern, the southern states had been very widely tapped by collectors such as Sesal Sharp and it was felt that in Appalachia there were many many songs still existing in the back hills, in the mountains. But in Vermont, it was felt that all of these songs were gone if they had ever been here. And in fact, there was a period of time when

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Helen Helen Flanders felt that that she had won a victory over the south because she had collected more ballads than, in terms of titles of ballads, than the southern collectors had. I think it was very exciting for the scholarly community to find the numbers of ballads that they did and the types of songs that they found. Some of the songs that they found had not been found in the United States before. I can't give you examples right now.

MG That's okay. What were the various types of songs and tunes that were found? They weren't all child ballads?

JP In the, in the early years because of her contact with Phillips Barry, Helen Flanders was looking, I probably shouldn't even be calling her Helen Flanders should I, no.

MG I don't know.

JP Okay. In the early years because of her contact with Phillips Barry, Helen Flanders was looking primarily for what are called child ballads and these are ballads that were originally collected by a man named Francis James Child in the British Isles. They have been looked upon by the scholarly community beginning in the 19th century as some of the oldest ballads. Some of them date back to medieval times. In addition, she looked for some other, let me start that again. During the early years, Mrs. Flanders was really only looking for this type of ballad and so she passed over some of the very very important other types of songs that existed in the 1930's and 1940's. But as time passed on, she met other collectors, she met other scholars, she was in contact with many scholars throughout the country really and I think that they helped her to develop her own collecting techniques and to understand that there were more songs in the world than the child ballads. She began to look for broadside ballads, as well as the child ballads. Broadside ballads are often separated from child ballads in that they existed in a broadside format, in a printed format, sold on the streets as penny ballads and song sheets during the 18th and 19th century. The child ballads were very often only in the oral tradition, found only in the oral tradition. There were American popular songs, what she called stage songs that she was looking for as well. These songs were especially popular in the lumber camps and many of the songs that she collected were from the lumbering tradition in Northern Vermont, Northern New Hampshire, in, certainly in Maine. And I think that many of the songs came from that tradition. There were religious songs, hymns that people certainly had in their repertoires and other, other religious ballads and songs.

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Also she looked for children's songs or at least she, she collected children's songs. I'm not sure rather she was looking for them. But when she began more openly to ask people what they learned, what they knew, they began to offer a much wider repertoire.

MG You said that the first book was published within a year?

JP Yes.

MG And how many more books were there?

JP I believe she published a total of seven books and they were published between 1930 and 1965. Her last book was in fact a series, a four volume series that in which she collected all of the child ballads that she had learned, or that she, sorry, she collected all of the child ballads that she had, had collected over the years.

MG What about the, we don't know anything about the methodology, but we do know something, we must know the technology, how, how it progressed from Brown's transcribing...

JP Uh huh.

MG ...to whatever, I can't remember.

JP Yea, okay. In the very early years, in 1930, Mrs. Flanders relied to some extent on manuscript paper, on transcription. She was not able to do this kind of transcription, but George Brown was. Also very early, she began to record on wax cylinder. She bought a dictaphone and used this machine from what I understand, George Brown would not use it. He was uncomfortable with it. And he felt that that the interviewees, the informants would be uncomfortable with it. But she began in 1930 to record on cylinder. She used the cylinder machine until about 1939 when she purchased a disk cutter. Used the disk cutter until the late 1940's when she purchased a tape machine. And used the tape machine until the late 1950's when she stopped her collecting. We have here therefore a, an interesting history of sound technology, of recording technology. We have both the recording equipment and also of course the recordings themselves. The cylinders are all of wax, but the disks are made of a variety of materials, of aluminum, of acetate, of you know, many types of glass based and aluminum based.

MG When did the collection here begin?

JP In 19, between 1930 and 1940, Helen Flanders kept this collection in her home. She called it, I believe she called it the Vermont Archive. And she began to be aware of the value, huh, alright, I guess her awareness of the value of this collection grew over time as she collected more and more materials and she began to be afraid that something might happen to the collection. Especially, she seemed to be especially afraid of fire. And she felt that it would be very important to deposit the materials in, at an institution. She chose Middlebury College. I think she did some research, but made a choice and in 1941, it was formally given to Middlebury College and it has been here ever since.

MG What do you either know of the kind of person she was or infer from the things that you've heard in the work that she talks, she did?

JP I think Helen Flanders was a very charismatic woman. I think that her relationship with the people that she interviewed was very very strong. She appeared to be, from my discussions with some of the relatives of the people who were interviewed, people liked her very very much. From the letters that we have of hers, she she remained in contact with people. She supported people both emotionally to some extent with gifts at times, would send fruit at Christmas time and I think people appreciated that greatly. I think she was aware of the needs of the people that she was in contact with and she, as many collectors today do not, she had the financial \_\_\_\_\_ with all to follow through with help. She was a tremendous administrator of of the collection in that she both had the money and she had the vision, the ability to plan and to follow through on the planning. As an administrator she did some collecting, but she also hired collectors and in that Marguerite Olney, the woman who was curator of the collection from 1941 to 1960 became involved and she also did a tremendous amount of collecting, not only in Vermont, but in the other New England states as well. My understanding especially after having talked with some people who were interviewed by Marguerite Olney and knew her, is that she too was a very very gentle and warm person that people felt very very good about. And I think that that was a real key in collecting. The people, the people who were collecting were not necessarily scholars, were not necessarily looking to to you know write as some scholarly tome on the subject at all. Their real skill was in, their real skills was as people people. (LAUGH)

MG The people that Flanders and the others collected from, especially Mrs. Flanders, how broad was were they in the terms of the Vermont social economic spectrum? Did they tend to be more particular class or type of people or did they represent a variety?

JP I think that that the vast majority of the people that Mrs. Flanders and Marguerite Olney and the other collectors collected from during the 1930's, 1940's were people who were not highly educated. They were not tremendously literate people. They were people that and she collected from people who were active in the lumbering tradition. She collected from people who had many service type jobs. These were people whose financial situation was such that they were not able to be involved with many of the, of the new technologies that were responsible for taking away many of these older traditions. So that in the 1930's and the 1940's they were still sitting around and singing some of the old songs. They weren't relying on the radio for their entertainment. Many of them did not have electricity or running water and they went to work and they came home and entertained each other with some of the old stories and songs. She also did interview some members of, of an upper, upper middle class. I can tell from the accents and also some of their, the titles. There are a few doctors who were interviewed. I believe she interviewed her own husband at one point. He's given a couple of songs to the collection, a couple of children's songs. But I would certainly say the vast majority would be considered working class people. Also the vast majority of the people were in their late years in life, in their 70's and 80's and some in their 90's. And I'm surprised that how good their singing voices continue to be. And I wonder often about the voices that we do not hear because people were not willing to sing. And all those memories of songs that you know, I'm not sure when I'm 70 or 80 I'd be willing to sing. (LAUGH) But I might have a lot of songs and they'd go away with with my passing. So.

MG What is your assessment of the value of the work that she did?

JP I think the value of any oral historian, any person who is collecting material, who is preserving material, that can be used in the future is very very high. And that that can include children who are recording just a brief conversation in a school or in their families to take back to school to someone like Helen Flanders who's recording songs without contextual data to the highly trained today, highly trained collector who is recording hours and hours

and hours of conversation that would include both the items as well as the context. I think today people are beginning and really only beginning to learn how to use this material. And one of the things that people are doing, it's one of the things that I'm doing, is taking this material which is not rich with information, they're really just items, and going back to the families and finding out more about what, what it was all about, you know, when these songs were song and why and how and what was it really like during those times. And with that data, with the actual song, with the voices of their grandmothers, so much more information is coming forth, that in fact we have a very very rich Archive.

MG You said Helen Flanders recorded, collected into the '50's?

JP Yes.

MG And when, why did she stop, was it, why did she stop, when did she die and all that kind of final chapter?

JP I believe probably in the late '40's or the early '50's, Helen Flanders began to have a series of strokes. And she, her health deteriorated greatly in the 1950's. Although Marguerite Olney continued many of the contacts, continued to travel beyond, where Helen Flanders was able to travel. The support and including the administrative support that Helen Flanders gave to the collection began to fall off more and more as her health deteriorated. And by the late 1950's, she made a decision to withdraw her support for the collection at the college. And the college then made a decision to withdraw its support. So that by 1960, the collection was no longer financially supported and Marguerite Olney was let go and the collection went into storage. After that time, Helen Flanders did publish her book. It was before of course, before 1960, that it was all in the works, but the ancient ballads traditionally sung in New England, the four volume set was published in the mid-1960's and her health did continue to deteriorate. She died in 1972 I believe. Marguerite Olney did not remain in contact with the collection, but she did hold a lot of materials in her home and she died in 1978 and these materials have come back to us.

MG Okay I think that's going to give me what I need except for a little ambience sound for about a minute here.

JP Okay.