

“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.

Katherine Johnston
March 2, 1988

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK This is an interview for the Green Mountain Chronicles and Mrs. Johnston I realize I don't know your full name. Would you give it to me.

KJ Katherine

MK Katherine

KJ Yes.

MK Katherine Johnston in Montpelier and this is the 2nd of March, 1988. Mrs. Johnston, let's begin with you. Are you a native of Montpelier?

KJ No.

MK Where were you born?

KJ I was born in Peacham, Vermont.

MK Peacham, uh huh. Did you grow up on a farm?

KJ Yes.

MK You did?

KJ Uh huh.

MK Brothers and sisters?

KJ Three. There was two sisters and a brother.

MK Any of them still on the farm?

KJ No, no, none on the farm. My mother sold it and she lived to be 99, but she came here to live with my sister in Montpelier.

MK So you had, sort of had the family back together again.

KJ Oh yes. I have one sister living here. She owns a house over on Pearl Street.

MK Just around the corner, yea, that's nice.

KJ Yea. And my brother lives on the cape.

MK That's a nice place to go visit too.

KJ That's right. (LAUGHING)

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MK Let's see now, what, just to get a little bit of the sense of the times when you began working with the WPA. What had you been doing before that?

KJ I had, hadn't had any job at all. I finished college in '34 and was home a year. And then I, this job appeared so I was given a chance.

MK Was your family hit really hard by the depression, through those times?

KJ No.

MK No.

KJ Not really. No, we had a farm that we, where we could live very comfortably. We took summer guests in the summertime.

MK Did you have fall foliage tourists in those days?

KJ No, not too many. We had guests that came to the house through the fall. We had several painters that came to stay in the fall from well, mid west and so forth.

MK So, okay, now you worked, did you work the whole time that you were with the WPA for the same division or the project?

KJ Yes, yes.

MK Okay, tell me a little bit about how, you say you saw, you saw an advertisement for the job?

KJ No, a friend of mine knew the opening was coming up.

MK Okay, what was the opening?

KJ It was with the, oh dear, now what was the name of it? Do you know this?

MK Historic Reference?

KJ I think that was what it was called probably Historical Records. I can't remember the title. It was, I don't think it was a part of the writer's project, but it might have been but I don't think so. We were near them in the group.

MK In the group, you mean in...

KJ There was a group of the writers project very near us and as far as offices were concerned. But we had a lot of field workers that were out. What they did was to go to the town offices to survey the records and they were to classify them and show the dates that were in possession in the office and where they were located and if they could find that that some had been destroyed by fire, some previous records, they were so noted I mean. It was, but they were all classified as to type of record.

MK What kinds of records are they?

KJ Birth records, land records, deeds, and all such school, there were even school districts that they surveyed too. But we'd have at least two workers together and they would go and bring, send in all the material in a, well probably they had a form, I can't remember, but they probably presented it to us with a form and then we were the, we had to edit it according to the Washington directions as to how it was to be collected and classified. Then there was also every town had a short history of the town, this organization when and by whom or something like that. But it was...

MK Did they compile that history?

KJ No, that had to be done in our section through research mostly because unless you could find, well we used histories of towns and then of course there was Hemingway's and some of those, but they weren't so reliable as sometimes as finding other sources. We didn't go into like private collections or anything like that. We were only the public records.

MK So it was, the field workers were in a sense doing sort of an inventory of the town records?

KJ That's right, that was what they were doing and they had to send in their reports every week and then, or if they finished a town, maybe some times they waited until they collected because often times those things were in boxes or anywhere. You can't imagine where they were stored and the condition. We had to note the condition of them too.

MK So the field workers actually would have to go file by file to see what was in there?

KJ That's right. They went through all the, all the records. We had, as a rule, we had no problem with the, with people wanting us to check it. I don't know whether it was any

help to them unless they found things that they didn't know they had. That was the...

MK I think they might have actually.

KJ I think they might have. I don't know whether they, whether the final editions were ever saved or not. I haven't any idea.

MK Final editions?

KJ I mean of all the towns that were put together. You see, they were finally assembled and I don't know what, each town was supposedly completed and I don't know what became of it.

MK So there would have been somewhere like a library of the holdings of the various town records or?

KJ I don't know. I wondered this. I never found out what happened.

MK What was the rationale for doing it in the first place?

KJ Well I suppose it was for helping people to have jobs as probably the main thing and they felt it was probably something that was, might be worthwhile, I don't, I never knew exactly what it was.

MK What was your work specifically?

KJ I supervised the office group and keep track of my field people and time wise and their reports and so forth. And I did have to do some editing, but I didn't do a lot, I did some.

MK Did you have any, were you involved in hiring any of the field people?

KJ Not as a rule because there was a, I had a supervisor of course and he was the, he did the hiring.

MK Did you ever have problems with any of the workers? Did anyone ever try to?

KJ Well we had a few problems I guess like you would in any, no not, they were, they needed the work. I mean that was the point I guess.

- MK Part of the reason I was asking was that when I interviewed Madeline Davidson, I got a picture of that, from what she said as a time that seemed to be, according to what she seemed to feel, there was a higher level of public moralities, sort of, that people would not try to cheat the system to the same degree that people today do.
- KJ I didn't, I didn't feel that way. Of course Madeline was in a different section in a way. More administration I think wasn't she?
- MK Well she dealt with the sewing project a lot.
- KJ Oh she did, I can't remember that. No.
- MK She was involved with the writer's project for awhile too.
- KJ I see. I was trying to think. Was, Mrs. Greer, was that her name that was, was the head of the section that Madeline was in maybe?
- MK There was also a Mrs. Simpson.
- KJ Simpson oh yes, yea, she was here. I knew who she was. No I, I didn't have any idea about the work at all, it was just a, I had this call from a friend that was working in, well I think she might have been in the Social Services at the time or something, maybe it was government, I'm not sure, but later she was with the Social Welfare, the State, but she was a college friend and she heard the opening, she knew I wasn't working, so she called me up and said why didn't I apply so I did. That was, I wanted to go to work. It wasn't just what I had planned to do, but I had to be home a year. We had illness in the family and I had, so I had stayed at home a year that was all.
- MK What had you planned to do?
- KJ Well I liked anything with mathematics because I was a math major in, in college, but I didn't want to teach. And so finally I was in the Actuarial Department at the National Life, but it was much more interesting.
- MK I was wondering whether in thinking about going through the town records, have you ever tried to research an old, to trace back a house for instance to see who had it and who had it before and going on over that?
- KJ Yes, I had to trace this one because we were asked by the insurance people to see when it was built. Well I couldn't go back, the deeds in the office here were not,

didn't take me back as far as I thought they ought to, but as far as my husband was born in this house and, and it had been in his family for a good many years. We knew who built it, but we could go back to some, well, they couldn't go back to the builder, so I, we haven't really, we got back to 1860 or '70 and that's as far as we could go back so.

MK And you had the advantage of knowing that it had been in his family so.

KJ Yes, uh huh, yea.

MK I imagine some of the towns, some of the records must have been quite a mess?

KJ They are, the records are hard to follow because if you have to search any titles, there were, they weren't really markers, I mean they were, it was very difficult when we had to have our survey done of our farm before it was sold. It was pretty difficult to find the, all the corners and so forth. But you, because they mark by so many, oh I suppose it was feet or strides or something else, whatever, they you know how they did and you can't really and they sometimes they mark with a tree or something I guess and that was not very.

MK Has the tree been cut down, yea.

KJ That's right. (LAUGHING)

MK It seemed like it might have been a fascinating project to have been a field worker on for awhile until you got bored with going through all those cartons?

KJ Yes it was I think, they, it must have been. I didn't, I only went out once or twice because we were having, maybe wanted to see what was happening to the workers and why we weren't getting better results and I did stay a few days outside, but I didn't travel very much, so I didn't get the experience in the offices as much.

MK Did you, you say why you weren't getting the results you wanted, was that?

KJ Well, whether they were really working and getting the material as they needed to. If they were finding it all and also and to check on the hours and so forth. (LAUGH)

MK So, was, did someone else regularly do that?

KJ No, we didn't have any, no field supervisor really. There was...

MK How many people do you think were, if you could just roughly guess how many people did you have out in the field during all of this?

KJ It would be very difficult to remember that. We would be working quite a few towns at the same town, so we must, they always grouped always two people and oh, we must have had, I'd hate to say, but I should think ten or twelve pairs I would think. Of course we were at a disadvantage. They had to have a car. And in those times, cars, people couldn't afford them that was all. Their salaries weren't that large, but it was, it was maintenance I suppose, that's, they got a little mileage too on the cars which helped them. Well I know we had, it was quite an experience to see the kinds of people we had. I remember one was a minister that just didn't have any parish so he needed work and well all sorts of teachers. I think one was a law student. So we had quite a few varieties.

MK Did you, do you remember any of the people who worked in the?

KJ Oh yes, I can remember a few of them. I know there was Joe Foti here in town the attorney. I don't know as he would want to be reminded, but he worked for us too. He lived, I forget whether he was in Rutland at the time I believe seems though. He didn't work with us very long. And I can't, as I say, this minister I'm sure is not living. And Agnes Flood, I can't think what her name was when she worked there, but she was in the office I believe, but I vaguely remember anyway that's all. So I really can't. I didn't work too closely with too many people because our office group was not very large. I don't believe we had, oh, we might have had six or so at a time. We didn't have a large group. There was a lot of typing to do see. All this had to be brought in and typed. Of course we had a hard time to keep office space. That was our big problem. We were in the Pavilion Hotel on the top floor for awhile. We were, trying to think of all the places we were in. We were in one section at one time of the old community hall. And I can't, I can't really remember all the different places we were in, but we were scattered around at different times. Well there was just we had a space wherever there was room for us that's all.

MK Where they gave you space?

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KJ Yea, because we only needed the room for typewriters and so forth and well files and things like that. No, it, I really can't remember too much about it. I know I had quite a bit of correspondence to do with reporting to Washington and so forth, but that's all I can remember about it.

MK Well that's quite a bit more than I had before so.

KJ I don't think you're going to get a very much of a information that's all.

MK Well, no it's a good start. I might try to give Mr. Foti a call and see whether he.

KJ See if he can remember anything. You tell him I, my memory is pretty vague. (LAUGHING).

MK Okay, well thank you for taking the time.

KJ Well...

MK It didn't hurt now, did it.

KJ No it didn't hurt, but I don't think I want to hear it. (LAUGHING)