

Virgil McCarty  
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Mary Kasamatsu  
Interviewer

MK This is an interview with Virgil McCarty of Passumpsic, Vermont on May 11, 1988 for the Green Mountain Chronicles.

VM They were fighting the depression and that's where WPA came from. One of those depression fighting programs of FDR and gee whiz I was just barely out of high school. I was, I guess even a little younger than you are. When, didn't have anything to do. No jobs or anything, and somebody told me to go to Montpelier and see somebody down there. Well I was always interested in writing and researching, even back in high school and so said see somebody down there about the writer's project. They had a writer's project. They had a historic research project and they had, oh, they had painting, artists you know. Have you ever seen these murals on post offices and all. They're all done by WPA artists, just give them jobs doing the thing they loved to do. And, but I was totally green about all of that just out of high school. This was '40, no, it was 1935 I think. And so, that's when I went to work for the WPA and somehow I ended up with John Clement. Now if you read much on Vermont History, you'll run into his name. He was then one of the leading most noted Vermont historians and he lived in Rutland. And he was given the job of organizing the historical records survey. And so he got in there and he got it going. Well it was a project for inventorying all the records in town clerk's offices. So we'd go about office to office digging out everything we could find you know. And incidently that's when I ran across something that led into this thing here. I ran across an ancient map of a town that was wrapped up and in the back of a safe somewhere down around Rutland of a survey of a town line and nobody had seen it for years and it had to do with a change. John Clement, I don't know why John Clement gave me the job of doing this digging up, he gave me a special job. He said to me one day, I want you to do something for Vermont that has been done in one other state that I know about and I think that was Florida. We want a history of all the town and boundary line changes in the state that have ever happened and we want to show that in maps. And that's where this business came from maps. I got started on it and I had to work out of the Vermont State Law Library. That's where there's an abundance of records. You probably have been in there. Everything you know going, they have even newspapers that go way back before the civil war and things. But now these are on microfilm over at the University of Vermont. Anyway I was there as a basis of operation in the State Law Library in Montpelier. And out of that I'd go here and yonder. And, one thing that I, that I was so delighted with was that the Secretary of State, now I can't think of his name, of the '30's, skips

my mind. I know Mary Jean Nye was the State Archivist of that time and I worked with her. The Secretary of State would let me go right into his, his ancient documents. He had them way down in the vault underneath the State House and I'll tell you a little story if you want to

in or out. While I was down there one, one Friday afternoon looking into these old documents trying to run down something, I was in there all alone and you know it was quiet down in there and somebody came and was just shutting the vault door. I suddenly had a horrible thought. If they shut that door and lock it and I'm in here, I can't let anybody know it, I'm here or what not and it will be Monday before anybody comes around here. I just happened to think and thrust a book in there quick enough to stop it and stop them locking the door on me. So I got out of that one. Well that was a delight, but I've since been unable to repeat. I haven't pushed it, trying to get the Secretary of State to get into his vault again. I didn't really need it. In pursuit of finishing the job, I just barely got started on that job when the war came along. And so everything kind of folded up. As I said I started in '35, so I worked through '35, '36, up to '40, '41 and the whole project kind of folded up you know. John Clement had long gone. And they'd had I don't know how many different heads of the project since he did and none of them were any, were near the scholar John Clement was. And so we worked along with it and I had a fellow that succeeded John Clement. His name was Perry Merrill or Merrill Perry. At the time, there was a state officer, a high state officer by a reverse name. So I was always getting their names mixed up. One was Perry Merrill, one was Merrill Perry and I worked for the guy who was then heading up the historical records survey and he was engineering to get this book published that I was working on, the map history. And he died suddenly with tuberculosis. He was just a young man. And that was shelved then, almost permanently shelved. And so just a couple, three years ago, that whole, these manuscripts, you know, the whole works were in the historical records survey, historical society over there in Montpelier way back in the vault or shelf or somewhere getting musty you know and it stayed there until a few years ago and there was a, a graduate student, University of Vermont; that story is in this clipping here, was prowling around doing a research paper on some aspect of Vermont History.

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VM What was his name? I'd have to look it up here. And he ran across that old musty document that I had done and he got to looking through it and this is just the kind of information I need. I'll see if I can get in touch with McCarty. And somebody told him how to get in touch with me and he did. He wanted to know if he could use it, quote from it you know and that sort of thing. And I said oh, of course, go right to it. And that's what gave me the thought that maybe I'd better finish it. So I got back to it. And then I expanded it into a book on Vermont History which I think is a novel approach to Vermont History. Expanding on these maps, I, well do you have any questions?

MK Sure. Well let's, let's go back now to, I want to first start off with, not start off. Just a little background about you and coming up to the point where you began working with the WPA project. Are you a native of, of this part of Vermont? Where did you grow up?

VM Not quite. I was born in West Virginia.

MK Oh! okay. I lived in West Virginia for awhile.

VM Yea. And well that's a, that's a story all in itself you know, how we came to come from West Virginia up here. Dad was a preacher and preachers don't get rich very fast. One of those circuit riding preachers in West Virginia and all of a sudden one day we got a letter back about 1918. There's a farm in Vermont for you. You just come up and take it. My granddad had sold out his estate in West Virginia which he carved out of the wilderness with a large family of boys mostly and he had one of the finest establishments, estates there in that part of the country. And he sold it all and came to Vermont and bought a bunch of farms. It seems that a very, let's say conniving uncle I had who'd married dad's second sister. He had two sisters and one that I remember about. And she married this fella from Montana and he was a kind of a what do they call them, wheeler dealer type of guy and he saw in one of these things that advertised real estate, what is it?

MM That's Straut, is it?

VM Yea, Straut Agency Catalog - Cheap Land in Vermont and he came in and he bought a farm up there in Woodbury and he got in touch with all of my aunt's brothers down in West Virginia and my granddad, oh boy, look at these beautiful farms up in Vermont that are going for almost nothing. A few hundred dollars and you can buy a farm up here. This

was the winter time. He'd come out from Montana in the winter time and looked at all those beautiful level fields covered with snow. And they bought farms and it was kind of a sad story when the snow melted in the spring and the boulders began coming, appearing up in there. But that's what granddad did, he bought a bunch of farms. He told dad he had one and sold his, came to Vermont in 1919. Well I started in school up there in a little rural school house and they closed it up that fall in the beginning of closing down the little old country schools. One of the best years, a part of a year ever spent. And we had to go over to Cabot which was then kind of consolidating several towns and first grade from there on up through and high school. Well I got up into high school, dad decided he was going back to West Virginia and preach some more. So we struck off for West Virginia again. But we were only there three, four years and the depression came on and mom said we're going back to the farm up in Vermont. So in 1929, we came back to Vermont and stayed there ever since. Well...

MK To go back a little bit. You started with the one room school in Woodbury?

VM It was in Cabot.

MK It was in Cabot, the one room school?

VM Over on the edge of Cabot, yea. The West Hill School they called it, right on a little pond up in there. And that was 1920, 1919 and '20.

MK And you liked that experience?

VM Yea. Well I have a very fond recollections of that as compared to Cabot. A little, you know, frog in a big puddle, and there I was a big frog in a little puddle. Well I always enjoyed school wherever I went. I always like the teachers and they liked me and you know. There was a little episode in there let's see. This farm that we got back in the '20's, somebody persuaded dad to deal for another farm over in Woodbury. He was always reaching out somehow or other for something different or something additional so he traded for this farm. It seemed that it had all kinds of timber on it and I had two older brothers that needed a job and he thought oh, well they'll get out the timber and pay for the farm and we'll have another farm. We didn't need it about like we needed you know two heads. Well, so we moved over there and spent a year

over in that, over in Woodbury where I went to another one room school. And that was another very delightful experience in my life. I was in fifth grade then, I think.

MK What did you like about the one room schools, as compared to the larger schools?

VM Well I, I to this day, I think it was a mistake getting rid of them because the one room school, the teacher knew all the parents. The parents knew the teacher. It was a big family. It was kind of an extended family thing that one room school. And it was, we got more than reading, writing and arithmetic that way. We got social, we socialized. They'd have parties off and on. At the drop of a hat, they'd have some kind of party. Everybody would come in and see everybody else and the teacher was naturally right involved, right in the middle of all this. And we seemed to have very lovely teachers and so I got more out of it than just how to read and write and count and all that in that little one room schoolhouse. When we went to Cabot, I was in a room of three grades. Went into another room with three more grades and then we went upstairs to junior high and then there was senior high. And that was still a small high school by modern standards. We had about six teachers in it and I didn't care for that nearly as well as I did the little one room schoolhouse. But...

MK The family atmosphere was missing in larger...?

VM Yea, there was something, that interaction or something that was missing. But I still had good teachers, and liked them, got along fine there in Cabot and moved right along up through into high school until dad had to go back south. Down there three years and back up to Vermont again. Well then there's another little development. Dad didn't come back with us. Ma and the family came north again back to the farm. This was 1929 remember. That was the year of the big crash.

MK Now was this before the crash that you came back?

VM Yea, before it hit...

MK Uh huh.

VM ...very far and wide in the fall of 1929. In '30's, in the early '30's when the depression began to be felt you know out in the country, so we came back up here and I had to forget school to take care of the family. So I had to

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go out and get a job somewhere and that was an assistant on a farm. I remember they paid me about \$12 a week and my room and board to help on the farm. And the \$12 had to go to take care of my mother.

MK How many children were home then?

VM Let's see, we had, two brothers and a sister there. I had two other brothers and a sister who were older than I were. They were out on their own, but these two brothers and a younger sister I had to take care of and my mother, so I spent a year at that then went back into high school and finished. So I've always been a year or two behind because when I started out in the first grade down in West Virginia in the fall of 1918, my birthday is in October. So I couldn't start school until I was, let's see, almost 7 years old and then when we came to Vermont for some odd reason, they stuck me back in the first grade again.

MM Nobody bothered to tell them \_\_\_\_\_.

VM Yea, nobody bothered about it. My mother didn't or dad didn't seem to bother to bring the records from down West Virginia up here and I went into school and, and I was in the first grade again. Well I wasn't, I was only a kid, I didn't know what was going on and so there I lost another year you see. I was two years older than I should have been in the first grade.

MK Of course in a one room school, it probably didn't matter so much.

VM No, nobody thought anything of it, but when, as the years went by, I found myself older than the kids around me and when I got into West Virginia one time, a teacher said why don't we put you a grade ahead. Well nothing was done about it. I could have been in a grade ahead just as easy as I was where I was but they didn't do anything about it. Then when I got up here and lost another year and found myself a junior in high school almost as old as some of the teachers, well then I did insist on graduating, I knew I had to. Most kids would have dropped out about then. So I graduated in 1932, the six of us. Well let's see, I should say something else. When I left the WPA, I went down to Springfield, just before, that was 1940 I think it was. It was Springfield, Vermont. A friend and I said we'll go down there and see if we can't get a job in the building up the country for the war you know. And they were needing people all over everywhere. We struck out and went down there. And I waltzed into J & L and they gave me a job as a draftsman because I had been using a

few little simple drafting tools making the maps, these maps. And I told them about that and oh yea, you ought to make a draftsman alright, so they put me at a job down in the plant with the guy who made and designed lenses for their comp reader which was a very optical devise for measuring the piece parts you know, metal parts and the very fine measurements. And I worked for him awhile, but I had no background in drafting and didn't know what I was doing, but I would look over his drawings and I'd find the little fault here and there and tell him about it and he didn't like that so he sent me up into the main office. You go up there. They'll give you something to do, well they did. They gave me some busy work. They had me taking out these old drawings that they'd had in the files and were getting worn and they needed some new lines and I would line them here and there. And I began finding mistakes in them. And I'd go up to the boss, here's an error. He'd say yup, you're right. That's an error. Then pretty soon I'd find another one. I had to go up to the boss again. There's another error in this, somebody has made an error. And showing a drawing from one operation to the next and the next and so on and he'd say you're right, you're right. He says I guess I don't have a job for you. So they stuck, they put me over here in design drafting, a job that you have to work as a detailer for years and years to work into. And here were dozens of draftsmen back through the plant all working, most all of them were detailers and here I was shoved from this point right straight over into a little select group of about a dozen design draftsmen. They're the elite of the drafting group. And that's one of the best jobs I ever had in my life. I loved it and everybody loved me. We got along great and the company got me deferred about three times I think it was. But I was in the Montpelier Draft Board and I didn't know enough to transfer to the Springfield Draft Board. Montpelier didn't care a wrap about Springfield's needs or whatever, they had a quota to fill. And time after time, they'd come up with their quota and they couldn't quite meet it and they'd get after me down there in Springfield. Well they got me deferred about two, three times, but finally they said no, nothing doing, you got to go. So they pulled me out of that job there where I was doing more for the war effort in one day than I did in all the four years I spent in the army. They put me, took me out of that and they sent me on my way into the army. I wound up down there in oh, the Eastern Seamen Corp Training Center at Monmouth, at Fort Monmouth, where I got my basic training. They asked me what do you want to do. And you always, you know, they always say you ask for something they would give you the opposite. And I said I'd like to do something that I can use later, how

about electronics. And you know, that's where they put me. I couldn't believe it. They put me in electronics school. And I studied hard. I studied hard and made A's on all my tests. They said gee whiz, you ought to make a teacher here. They put me to teaching down there in the school, a subject that I knew about as much about as I had known about drafting when I went into that plant. When I began teaching it, I began learning things and so there's where I stayed for the entire war. Now did you have another question? You had something else there.

MK I wanted to back track in a couple different directions here a little bit, but to go back to the time with the WPA. Tell me about specifically what it was like, what you did, when you were going, you went around from town to town and?

VM Well I started out you know in my car and they paid I remember a little per diem, a little bit of money for my own to run around these town clerk's offices. And the boss in Montpelier, John Clement would make contact with these town clerk's offices and get permission and all that to come in and go through the records and told them what was going on and what we were going to do. And so we'd move in there. Usually two of us would go and inventory these records and we'd come out with a little book. They would mimeograph the, they had typists in the office who would type up the material we came back with and arrange it in the proper order and type it up and then they'd mimeograph it and make up so many of these little books. I don't know how many they'd make, one for each, one for the town and then various libraries.

MK Did the town clerks generally not know themselves what they had there?

VM Sometimes they didn't. Now we would find town records that had been stored off in barns and all kinds of places. Sometimes old records that they didn't want to bother with and we'd find gaps in records. Like I was saying, I was in my, I only did this a short time when Mr. Clement put me on this special project of working up the town boundary line changes and making these maps for the State. And then I began going out here and yonder and I found this map in an office down there in Rutland somewhere of a boundary change that didn't show up on any of the maps and I thought well I really found something here and recently I tried to look that up again and it was not in the office where I'd found it. It had been transferred up into Rutland somewhere in a library. And I went down there into the library and found a lot of things. Now this was

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recently. And I didn't find that same old map and I'm still in pursuit of it. And I think I found it at last. But that's one little thing I still got to finish.

MK Now what happens in cases like that? I mean, what is the actual, actual record? I mean, what is \_\_\_\_\_, the old boundary line or the new one?

VM I was writing this up into my book and documenting it and all the sources of the information is in the book. Well, let's see, I could give you.

MK I am just curious generally as to you know when you find something like that, does the State somehow change the record or does the town change the, does the official record of where the town boundary is, does that change then to reflect the...?

VM Well, now you're asking me an iffy question.

MK Yea.

VM Because back then when we found something like that, we'd put it in this book. I don't know what happened between the historical records survey in the town. That went through John Clement and whoever followed him. I can't remember any conflicts that we ran into then. All I do remember is one town line between Weston and Mt. Tabor that isn't clearly shown on any Vermont maps. And I was pursuing that one when I went to Rutland and dug into these old documents there. And I didn't quite get it finished when I decided, well, I got to see what's going to happen to all this business before I spend anymore time running all over the State. And so, I sat on it awhile. I did ride around to find out in pursuit of a certain document which I got onto somewhere down in, near Weston and I'm still going to look in on that. And there I expect to have something. I've even talked to the Secretary of State over there about it, about this particular boundary line. There don't seem to be any clear documentation on and he's quite interested. And so I'm now just waiting to see what the Historical Society does about this book, whether it's going to be worth my while to finish. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it if it's only going to end up the way the thing did back in the beginning of the war, and go into a dead file somewhere. So I hope to come up with something there that will make a change in the visual map of the State.

MK So there was never a full directory published for Vermont of the holdings of all the town offices.

VM No, that was more or less what I was working on. And I'm very proud to be able to say that I dug up something about a town up in Belvedere, Belvedere Gore somewhere up in there. Mary Jean Nye had a problem with it. The boundary line between a couple of towns didn't jive somehow. There's something wrong there. It bothered her and she asked me if I'd pursue it. So I did and I thought I found the solution and I wrote it up into an article that went into the Vermont Journal, the publication of the Historical Society with maps and everything showing that it was a matter of a change of declination north you know, how it moves over the years. And they didn't have the accurate kinds of transits and kinds of things in those days and they didn't know too much about it and so that there was an overlapping in there and I took these declination figures you know, figured it out and I came out with what I think to be an accurate solution and she liked it. And she made a reference to it in her, in a footnote in one of her State papers and she said there'd be, for further information on this, see a book coming out and that's the book that hasn't yet been published which I hope will be pretty soon. And that's what they meant here when they said pursuit of maps, McCarty's like searching from Barre Treasurer. It's almost as exciting.  
~~for buried treasure.~~

MK I can see how it would be, sure, trying to trace this together.

VM So I'm sitting around waiting now to see what happens to it.

MK Yea. It's interesting.

VM What else do you have got on mind?

MK I also wondered, you said you worked with J & L for awhile during the war?

VM Yea Jones and Lamson Machine Company in, when it was in high speed production. They were producing tools for the making of parts to go into airplane engines and making of tanks and things like that. They were all out in, that was in 1940 and '41, '42, so I worked in that as long as they would let me stay and do it. And so I'd make up the tool layouts for lathes, automatic lathes. The representative salesman for the plant would go all over the United States, and in fact all over the world selling the equipment, the tools to make parts for aircraft engines and automobile engines and all these, this war equipment. So they were always sending back the great bundles of blueprints. We need this production you know.

Some plant would say we need to make so many of these an hour you know, whatever it might be. And here come these bundles of blueprints and all kinds of instructions and data about how much production they wanted. And they'd dump them right on our desks. Say here take this, take whatever lathes and all are needed here and tool them up to make these parts here. And if they'd say we want so much production and it took ten lathes to make it you know, so that's what we'd give them. Sometimes 25 or 30 of these big expensive automatic lathes that would make parts almost automatically. And that was the job I had which I was very proud of. I was doing something for the war effort you see and so when I got in the army and went into Fort Monmouth, electronics school, I didn't know a capacitor from a resister and there I was to fool around with that which I didn't think was contributed a heck of a lot to the war effort. But that's what Uncle Sam said you must do, so I simply did it to the best of my ability and they let me stay right there during the war. Let me say, it's because I was a little old. I was just past 30 and to be in the foot soldier whatever you call them, they were usually younger. It's the only way I could figure they didn't call me out to go out into a theater of operation, combat, so I was right there during the entire war until it was all over.

MK What was Springfield, Vermont like when you, during the war?

VM Oh, just a little town. We lived I think in Windsor and commuted back and forth to Springfield. I didn't get, we didn't have much to do with Springfield, just go down there to the plant, work and we'd pile the car with a few other guys and go back to Windsor at night. Windsor had a plant too, but it wasn't anything like J & L. J & L has gone through different ownerships you know. I don't know what they're doing?

MK I don't know what's taken...

VM But it was quite a, it was quite a plant in those days. See everybody at the plant was very good and cooperative and one of the owners was a former governor at that time.

MK Flanders?

VM Who?

MK Flanders?

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- VM Yea, Flanders. In fact is, he'd come in and wander around and see us every now and then. Of course I didn't hob knob with him too much but I'd see him. He'd come around and speak, yea. He lived in that fabulous mansion up on the hill just out of Springfield. I remember one time when I was a kid, in high school up in Cabot, they always sent out a couple of boys every year to Boys, what do they call that? The boys would have a State reunion or a sort of a thing.
- MK Boys State?
- VM Boys State yea. And they'd select two boys out of each community to go to this thing and I was one of the two one year and they put us up in that estate down there. They'd put the boys up you know here and yonder all around town. And we were the two that went into that fabulous home and he had a, he had a telescope there for looking at the stars and all that sort of thing. It was quite an experience.
- MK I had wondered, whether it seemed like Springfield was really bustling with more activity in terms of all...
- VM Well they had not only J & L, they had Gear Shaper, Chuck and Bryants, Bryants, Chuck and Grinder Company. They had three big machine shops going full blast. It made Springfield quite an industrial town during the war. I guess you'd have to say it was all on account of the war that they had so much industry down there, money coming into the town you know. Other than that I haven't kept up with J & L. My contact with the plant was through my boss. His name was Henn, H E N N, Kenneth Henn, a young man who oversaw the operation and all my interaction was with him. I had a brother-in-law who went down there and got a job down in the plant at the, right after I did. He went down because I did more or less and got a job there and of course I had quite a lot to do with him and he had quite a lot to do with the workers around him and they seemed to be all had a very good feeling about what was going on. They were all peeking into the war effort and of course there were people there that had been working there for years. I remember a couple of guys in the department where I was. I can't remember what they did but they'd been working there for years. They felt very proud to having been there so long and still functioning. And there were, oh J & L had been around a long time when I went to work there.

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MK Were you involved in any kind of community volunteer activities during the war, plane spotting or scrap metal drives or any of those kinds of things?

VM Not in tin, I never got into any of that. I guess, I guess I felt I was doing my job. I never was approached by anyone. I don't think May was. She was teaching school then. Yea. Yea, she was teaching school down around there. So you didn't get involved in any drives, did you? Are you awake? Asleep, no.

MK So you commuted from Windsor to Springfield. That's not, that's not all that far is it?

VM No it's not too bad.

MK I was wondering about whether you had any in terms of gas rationing or something like that?

VM Well we did have that yea.

MK Did you have any kind, how was that worked out?

VM Well we'd get a, it seems I remember a book of tickets that we had to shell, shell out when we bought gas. So you had to kind of go easy.

MK How did they calculate how many tickets you got, or did everybody just get the same thing? Was it based on how far you had to go to work?

VM Yea, I guess that was it. I don't remember now what questions they asked me when I got it. But in order to conserve you know, we would have car pools. And I can say I guess fairly accurately that we'd car pool in order to save our own tickets for gasoline. Living in Windsor and May's folks lived up here on a farm not far from here and of course we wanted to come up and see them all we could. So we'd come up every weekend or so to see the folks and that's about all the driving around we did. And they were I think four, five of us who worked in the plant who drove back and to, to Windsor. I don't know, we didn't even try to find an apartment down there in Springfield. Maybe it was because they were scarce. I guess that probably was it and high priced you know. So we found a good comfortable one in Windsor and it left us closer home you know. Yea, I look back upon those as great times, but of course they were all clouded by the fact that they were brought on by terrible war going on somewhere and you couldn't really enjoy that.

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MK Everyone that I've interviewed speaks about that time as one where people did try very hard...

VM They're so different you know than these recent war things, Korea, and Vietnam and all that. That was a war that you knew had to be done and everybody jumped in there and pulled together to do it. No ifs, ands or buts about it, but since then you know, all these political wars we have, have been having, it's an entirely different story in my point of view. So what, that was the last good war if there is any such thing. Kind of unpleasant.

MK Sure. The books \_\_\_\_\_.

VM Mary Nye has long since been gone you know. She was a fabulous lady. I got to work with her and we helped each other out. You know, she compiled the State papers, the first five volumes. I guess not the first volume, the first two volumes had been done, but I think it was the next three that she did, her name's on them, N Y E. And what's been done about that since. The fact is there for awhile, I was talking to her about I'd like to take over her job when she retired.

MK Uh huh.

VM But she would have liked to have had me done it, but she said you can't do it because you just got to have a degree in law to handle this job.

MK Because you needed that information that would have \_\_\_\_\_ or because you needed the credentials?

VM The credential I guess what they were interested in.

MK Yea.

VM I had an experience like that down in Florida, when the University of Miami which is in Miami (Cut Off)