

Phyllis Marks

Where: At her home in Glenville, WV

Date: April 22, 2016

Location: Glenville, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 1:20:48

Phyllis Marks
Glenville, WV

Phyllis Marks (June 5, 1927-June 22, 2019) was born Phyllis Mariam Frashure on June 5, 1927, in Sand Fork, Gilmer County, WV. According to folklorist Gerry Milnes, Marks was the last active ballad singer in the state who, as she says, “learned by heart,” via oral transmission, mainly from her mother and grandmother, both of Irish ancestry. Since 1954, Phyllis performed annually at the West Virginia State Folk Festival at Glenville. A fixture at the festival and in her community, the 2005 festival was dedicated to her.

Marks was recorded in 1978 for the Library of Congress and has been featured in various books and radio programs. In 1997, she worked with Gerry Milnes to release the Augusta Heritage album *Phyllis Marks: Old-Time Songs of West Virginia*.

In 2016, the West Virginia Folklife Program received a Henry Reed Fund Award from the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress to host and record a concert with Marks at the West Virginia Humanities Council. Read more about that concert here:

<https://wvfolklife.org/2016/10/03/i-think-that-the-women-made-the-folk-songs-phyllis-marks-in-concert/>

Materials from that concert are available via the Library of Congress/American Folklife Center in the Emily Hilliard collection on West Virginia ballad singer Phyllis Marks:

<https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=2017655418&searchType=1&permalink=y>

Read our tribute to Phyllis Marks on the West Virginia Folklife blog:

<https://wvfolklife.org/2019/07/02/a-tribute-to-ballad-singer-phyllis-marks-june-5-1927-june-22-2019/>

Interviewer’s notes:

I went to interview 88-year old ballad singer Phyllis Marks at her home in Glenville, WV. Folklorist Gerry Milnes believes Marks to be the last living ballad singer in the state who learned her repertoire via oral transmission. Marks is blind and was accompanied by her dog. She said she was hoarse today, but would sing for me another time.

Phyllis Marks Recordings

- Charles W. Bean and Derrick M. Jones West Virginia Folk Music Project (AFC 1979/076) Thirteen 10-inch tapes of the Hammons Family, Dewey Farley, Melvin Wine, Stan Childers, Russell Fluharty, and Phoebe Parsons. Also a party at home of Howard Glasser, Westport, Massachusetts, featuring South American Music (Ecuador); also Bobby Taylor (and “Taylor Made” group), Gerry Vance Group, both recorded at Huntersville Bluegrass Festival, Frank George (fiddle), and Professor Patrick Gainer, interview. Collected by Charles Bean and Derrick Jones, July 1978. [[catalog record](#)] AFC 1979/076: AFS 19,535B1-10: One tape containing songs sung by Phyllis Marks. Recorded in Cox’s Mills, West Virginia, July 26, 1978. (30 minutes; LWO 12,385 reel 11B)
- “The Spitting Story,” on [Seedtime on the Cumberland, Volume 1](#). June Appal Recordings.
- *Southern Songbirds: The Women of Early Country and Old-Time Music* by Rachel Anne Goodman, 13-part radio documentary. 1989-1990. Available in the [Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University](#).
- *Phyllis Marks: Folksongs and Ballads, vol.2*. Augusta Heritage Recordings. 1991. Cassette.
- *Phyllis Marks: Old-Time Songs of West Virginia*, 28-track album, Augusta Heritage Recordings. 1997. Compact Disc.
- “Molly Darlin,” on [Lest We Forget: The 50th Annual West Virginia State Folk Festival](#). 2000. Compact Disc.
- “In the Sweet By and By,” and “Redwing” on [Music in the Air Somewhere: The Shifting Borders of West Virginia’s Fiddle and Song Traditions](#) by Erynn Marshall, West Virginia University Press. 2006. Compact Disc (companion to the book).

EH: Emily Hilliard

PM: Phyllis Marks

00:00

EH: Alright, I'm gonna start it. So the date is April 22nd and I'm sitting here in Glenville, West Virginia with Phyllis Marks. Phyllis, could you tell me where and when you were born?

PM: I was born at Sand Fork, well at that time it was called Layopolis. It was an oil town that... there was a man by the name of Lay that had the oil company there and -opolis is village. But that creek that runs though Sand Fork was called Sand Fork Creek and people just started to calling it Sand Fork.

EH: Okay.

PM: I was born on June the 5th 1927.

EH: Alright. And could you tell me about your family?

PM: Well, my father died when I was 6 months old so I can't tell much about him but my mother and grandma both sung old songs and I was with grandma quite a lot til she died when I was 5. But afterwards I'd remember little bits and pieces of the songs she sung and I'd ask my mother if she remembered it and then she'd help me with it. And I have a sister Anna Laura (?) and I had some half-brothers and a sister that my father had by previous marriage, but they didn't live with us.

EH: And did your sister learn the songs too?

PM: Not very many. I learned to crochet, rag rugs, and she said, she'd say... how come you learned them songs and how come you sit down and make the rag rugs—I still do that—well because you wouldn't sit still long enough!

EH: (laughs)

PM: She was always scurrying around the house.

EH: Okay. And do you know how your grandmother—well I assume she learned them from her mother?

PM: My grandmother? She was a Messenger and her mother was a Carson. I don't know—I've heard more about her father singing than I did her mother. Her father was Peter Messenger, lived at Baldwin. And then of course, her mother did too!

EH: Do you know much about her father's family and where they were from?

PM: You mean the Carsons?

EH: Mmhm.

PM: No, but there was some Carsons over in there where I suppose they were related cause back at that time they didn't travel very far to get their mates. (laughs) And Peter Messenger when he come in to that area, he brought the Baldwin apple seeds, and that's where Baldwin got its name.

EH: Oh wow. So did that come from Virginia or has that always been a West Virginia apple?

PM: I don't know where it come from.

EH: Okay.

PM: There's a lot of Messengers over there though, in that area. But Peter Messenger—my grandma's father, bought her the property at Sand Fork where we lived.

EH: And what did your mother do?

PM: Well, she was a one-room school teacher. Just got married back then, women couldn't teach school. And then she got married, that didn't last very long. And of course that was—I don't know what she did after her first husband and her parted. But maybe me being born in '27, you know the Depression hit in '29. And then she worked around doing housework for people and then President Roosevelt took office, they had a book binding project up at Sand Fork and she worked at that. And she, well, actually grandma got a 40 dollar pension from her last husband and we thought that was a lot of money. That was pretty much money back then. And then when she died and we didn't have that to live on, she applied for welfare. And I'm not a bit ashamed of it because Franklin Roosevelt put those projects to help people to get back on their feet. And when she could get a job she did. Of course, now a days, it's a way of life.

EH: Right. And what was your childhood like?

PM: Well, we played... Sand Fork had always been incorporated as long as I could remember and we had sidewalks. And there was a sidewalk in front of our house. The town sidewalk, played hopscotch and I didn't feel as well as a lot of kids because my father died with osteoporosis, but they didn't know what it was back then. It was, his bones was like honeycomb. So he left that to me and I'd be just as happy if he left me an old shirt that I could throw it away. So I didn't feel too... I took, well I took (phosphorous?) for three years, and I guess I'm lucky—I've never had a broken bone! And other people have. But we played hide and go seek and I'd go with mom fishing. I went to school when I was 5 years old. When grandma got sick, I went... she'd take me everywhere she went and when she got sick, they asked the teacher if I could go to school, you know til she got better or whatever. And so after she died in September and the teacher was a local woman, Helen Snodgrass. And she told mom, Phyllis is learning as well as the rest if you get her a primer she can go ahead. So they got me a primer and I just strutted when

I come home that evening, I said, I don't want you to ask me to do a bit of work because I just have to study!

And one of the times that grandma was taking me up through a meadow, you know people walked everywhere they went back then. And there were shortcuts that didn't necessarily go on the road, she asked me, Phyllis did you ever see a hickory nut with the outer bark on it and I said no. And she reached up on a tree and got it and showed it to me and she said, you can put that in your pocket. And I said huh-uh. And she said alright and she put it in her pocket. We went on a little ways and my little heart was beating because I loved my grandma and didn't want to hurt her feelings, but finally I said, now I remember this—I said grandma, ain't it wrong to steal? And she said, of course honey, it's wrong to steal. I said grandma, you stealed a hickory nut. (laughs)

EH: (laughs) And what'd she say?

PM: Well, she put it back on the ground there where she picked it off the tree but I heard her telling mom about it and they laughed and I didn't know what was funny about that!

EH: You were very moral.

PM: Well, we was taught to leave other people's things alone and it's still that way.

12:07

I'm content. The Bible says to be content but if I... but if it's my nickel I want it, if it's your nickel I want you to have it.

EH: So you said your mother went fishing?

PM: Huh?

EH: You said your mother would fish?

PM: Oh yeah, she loved to go fishing. And then she'd... she took, when I got a little bigger, she'd take me and my sister Anna Laura to the woods on Sundays, afternoons and show us the robins nest and the Jack in the Pulpits and the lichens and that's one thing about being blind—I can't see nature. But I'm thankful for that—I know what things look like. I wonder—people that's born blind, they have no idea what things look like, do they?

EH: Right. So how did you lose your eyesight?

PM: Well I love tomatoes. And I was 14 and I belonged to the 4-H club and back then we didn't have the recreation center, we would go to the various high schools. So I went down to Tanner to the, that's where we had our 4-H camp. When I come home, my mother had tomatoes. And I ate tomatoes. For 2 or 3 days I ate nothing but tomatoes. Cause you see it was, my mother, my sister and me, we didn't set the table all the time but once in a while she'd say, now we're gonna set

the table today and she'd show us the table settings. But, I broke out in, in what the doctors around here called bold hives. Do you know what bold hives are?

EH: Uh, I think so?

PM: Well, it wasn't just little spots just here and there, I swelled up all over. My eyes swelled shut, my lip turned wrong-side out, my hands stood out like that (gestures with hand to show swelling). And all they did for it was give me soda. And so the doctor, my eyes got bad and the doctors said my body healed from those hives but my eyes didn't. And they kept putting medicine in to—it was eating ridges in my eye lids and scraping my eye balls and nothing seemed to work so finally the doctor put blue vitriol in there and he didn't tell me to cry and wash it out, but he thought I would. But I thought I was supposed to stand it so I did. That was at Clarksburg and we stopped over at Allan Bridge because they... there was an old doctor and he took it out and said your eyeballs ulcerated. And that was the beginning of the end because I couldn't, I've had several corneas, but they won't take because of that chemical burn.

EH: And how did you feel about that at the time?

PM: Well, I just, I thought all the time about, when I'd go to the doctor that they'd do something to help me. I still have hopes. I tried to get her to cut my eyelids off here and sew 'em back but they won't do that because they say that won't, that works for some people but they say that won't help me to see so my insurance wouldn't pay for it.

EH: Oh wow.

PM: A lot of people said to sue him and of course I'd be sitting on Easy Street if we had it. But we didn't because I thought he was trying to help me. Mom did too. And then to top that all off, I still could see, but I had to quit school because I got married at 16. And that was a mistake too. Cause I was just a baby myself. I had 4 children in less than 6 years and I used to tell at the Folk Festival (West Virginia State Folk Festival at Glenville) that the... it was during the war 1943, and President Roosevelt said to speed up production and my husband took it literally.

EH: (laughs)

PM: I said a lot of things about him! (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

PM: When Jane was born, that was the youngest, I had more trouble then than with any of the rest. And my children was all born at home. I told him I had to claim him cause I couldn't... said he got mixed up in the hospital (?). But I did make quite a bit of noise when Jane was born. And he said that's gonna be the last one. Cause he was too nervous. And I didn't know what made him nervous, but I aimed to keep him as nervous as possible.

EH: (laughs) And how long did you stay married?

PM: 54 years.

EH: Wow.

PM: Well, it wasn't personal it was...? asked me if we ever had any trouble and I said just one time, and they thought that was pretty good. But I said it lasted 54 years.

EH: (laughs) That's good. So when you were growing up did you know other people that sang old ballads, old songs?

PM: Not too much. The older people I did, but the younger people wanted to sing songs like "Blueberry Hill" and "Roses Blooming in the Wildwood," things like that.

EH: So how did you, you know sing, before you started performing would you just sing all the time around the house?

PM: Yeah, and mom sang all the time too. She'd sing going up and down the road. People would say, "Arlene are you happy?" and she'd say "No, I'm just whistling to keep up my courage."

EG: (laughs)

PM: And so, I learned to you know, since I didn't feel like playing a lot, I watched the ants and the spiders and things like that I thought was interesting. And I made good grades in school til my eyes began to fail me. But I didn't go completely blind until '81. They kept patching me up til I could... and I worked 15 years at the college cafeteria.

EH: Okay. When your mother would go fishing, what would she catch and how would she prepare it to eat?

PM: Well, she'd catch sunfish mostly when she'd go in the afternoon. I didn't learn until my son-in-law and sons started fishing that the best time was in the morning. But she did catch, if she put her pole in the bank you know, in the mud, and leave it overnight, she would catch some big fish. She was an early riser and I always was too. I know one time she caught a white perch I think it was, but she called it a buffalo. And she'd go, she got so excited. Said, "Oh, I've got a buffalo, I've got a buffalo."

EH: (laughs)

PM: And then she'd take my boys fishing.

EH: Then did she fry 'em up?

PM: Yeah, I learned to clean fish too. I had to clean the ones you caught and after I was married, my husband would go fishing, but he'd fish for big fish. If he caught the little ones, well, he'd throw 'em back.

23:56

But if the boys caught ‘em and cleaned ‘em, why I had a sausage mill, I’d just grind ‘em up and make fish cakes cause they really wasn’t big enough to do anything with, but they was just little fellers and they was proud of their fish. But mom after we got bigger and we didn’t want to, we wanted to go for walks on Sunday afternoons or go somewhere and play games, she’d go fishing by herself and she’d be out there talking to God and that was her most restful time. I wrote a poem about her fishing one time.

EH: Do you remember it?

PM: Yeah. It was after she got married for the 3rd time. Course her husband name was Arthur, but we called him Ott. He never heard of that’s probably—that’s something in the ? but wasn’t true.

Arlene was a little lady whose intentions were very good

She’d get right out in the garden and hoe as hard as she could.

Then she saw a fishing worm...

She hid that worm away in a can and tried hard not to look

But soon temptations got the best of her and she had to put him on a hook.

The weeds did grow in the garden there while Arlene tossed the line,

And Ott come home and how he did swear that clearly it was supper time.

Arlene come home weary and tired, Ott met her at the door, whipped her very hard.

Then she put salve on her wounds and said with a grin, just wait til you’re gone, I’ll go fishing again!

EH: So it wasn’t a very happy marriage?

PM: Yeah, it was. She lived with him 24 years.

EH: Ah. Wow. Did you learn to cook from her?

PM: Yes. I learned to cook, she... simple things and we were pretty hard up when I married and I never learned to cook much gourmet stuff. We just raised our own hogs and raised our own vegetables and I canned and the kids helped too.

EH: Mmhm.

PM: I only have 2 of my kids left.

EH: Oh wow.

PM: My youngest daughter died March 28, 2010. With brain cancer.

EH: Oh wow.

PM: And my oldest son died 2012 with inherited heart trouble. But I coped with that by thinking of the funny things they did—they was funny little kids.

EH: (laughs) like what?

PM: Huh?

EH: Like what?

PM: Like what? Well, their cousin my sister and she'd come out and spend the supper with us. Course they didn't have very much money but Jimmy, that's the oldest one, he was named after his father whose name was Jesse James. So we called him Jimmy cause we had a Jesse. Anyway he had 6 pennies and he said... and he lost 'em and he was crying and his cousin Billy said, well let's backtrack and see if we can find 'em and he said "But I don't have any shoes on!" can't make any tracks. And then the Christmas tree was for them, so... Jimmy again would work on the Christmas tree. We had bulb lights and he would work on—he was older then. And then Jane, the oldest one, she would pull up a chair and work on them and then burn... the Christmas tree fell on the floor about 5 times a day and I'd just set it back up. And I gathered up the toys from the Christmas before and started putting them in the, in the grate we'd burn coal in and Lynn had said—that was the 2nd son. Said "Oh you old rascal!" And they pulled all that stuff out. And we had a blackboard and I, my husband would usually take 'em out somewhere and drive around and I'd put the stuff under the tree and I wrote on the blackboard, "Last trip. Kids mean. –Santa Claus." And when they come in and read that, Lynne read, "Last trip kids. –mean Santa Claus."

EH: (laughs) That's funny. Did you teach your kids your songs?

PM: Yeah. When my oldest son was- he never got out of bed, I asked him what his favorite song was. Course he, at 60, he was too bashful to sing, at 60 he began to sing. He'd sing at church or just anywhere else, just solo. But I asked him what his favorite song was and he said "Dandoo." That's the song that's on the tape or CD. And when Lynn was courting the wife he married, she said "He just breaks into some of the silliest little songs!"

EH: And they were the songs you sang?

PM: Huh?

EH: And they were your songs, the songs you sang?

PM: Yeah- both of ‘em sung with the senior center when I was—I think I was the only one that was a senior citizen and had 2 sons that were senior citizens. Lynne comes over and sees about me in the evening. And he’s 70 years old!

EH: Wow. When did you begin to write poems?

PM: Oh, they just seem to come in my head. I don’t, I wrote one about West Virginia that was pretty long, but I don’t write poems anymore. Oh, I did too. I wrote a couple silly ones. Little silly ones. One was about my husband.

My husband shoots pool, plays cards, chases the old fox hound.

He shoots ... and squirrel and he’s really a man about town.

But the fences fall and the filth grows up and the house is going to pot

He sings his songs and he plays his games and he worries not.

He let the worrying to me.

EH: (laughs)

PM: The kids said, “that’s Pappy!” I was laying in the hospital one night and I thought of this one.

I love you mother one daughter said, but she seemed double anxious to bury me in the flower bed.

Another said “to the nursing home you must go, hurry it up and don’t be slow.”

And another son said, “I’ll see that she goes, I’ll turn the electric off of her stove!”

Another daughter said nothing at all. First she didn’t write and she didn’t call.

And mother wondered when she laid down to rest, which one really loved her best.

And all of them things was true. My daughter that died, always used to tell me—I have a bed ... out there in the yard—she’d always tell me that’s where they was gonna put me when I died. And Lynne to this day comes in here asking me, well he don’t ask me anymore which nursing home I want to go to because I was up there. And he got me out so now he comes in and says, “which nut house do you want to go to?”

But anyway, he was the one that said to the nursing home you must go and then I burned some things on the stove and it didn’t excite me, I just threw salt on ‘em, see I’ve got an electric stove, but it excited the kids and I caught a dishrag on fire too once. It was burning my hands so I put it

down in the floor and stomped on it. So the other son was Jimmy and he had my son come down and wanted to turn the electric off of my stove. And then Iris who lived down in Wood County, she's the one that don't write or call. So that was all true!

36:50

EH: When did you start performing your songs and poems?

PM: Well when I was at school, I would say great long poems but I didn't sing in public. And Dr. Patrick Gainer went to Webster County to see my mother but she wouldn't come down. And I was living on Lynch Run so they come up there on Lynch Run to see if I knew the songs... any old songs, and I did—I sang some. I was kinda bashful. And he said well your voice is not very loud but there'll be a microphone there. And I said, "See all these kids, I can't sing without a rocking chair!" And when I went to the stage there was a rocking chair! I didn't really mean it. But anyway. I guess at that time that was the year before he made the, his program at... on, at the college. The year before he made it into a festival, I was there at the meeting when he made it into a folk festival.

EH: The Glenville Folk Festival?

PM: Yeah. And then I still didn't think I was much of a singer, I just thought it was because I knew the old songs and they seemed to like 'em so I sang other places.

EH: Where else?

PM: So have you remembered yet what song was different? (prior to the interview, I told her that I'd heard the CD Gerry Milnes had made of her, and that some of the versions of her songs I'd never heard before.)

EH: Well I think it was "Dandoo." And do you sing a "Three Sisters" or a "Two Sisters"?

PM: Yeah, one pushed the other one in?

EH: Yeah.

PM: I don't think that's the real song, I think that's the play party where they're singing that when they're playing the game cause it says "Bow down, bow down."

EH: Well I'll have to come back some time when your voice is feeling better and record you singing.

PM: Oh, I worked on it all day, I went back to my old remedy of sucking a lemon.

EH: Oh, well if you want to try, then I'd be happy to.

PM: Well, you can tell I'm pretty scratch, can't you?

EH: Yeah, it's up to you.

PM: Now what's your name?

EH: I'm Emily Hilliard.

PM: Now where are you from?

EH: I grew up in Indiana.

PM: Well, I told her (her caregiver), I got onto her about that this morning. She said... I said I told you twice to tell her I was hoarse and she said "Well I thought you wouldn't be hoarse this morning." And I said, well that wasn't up to you to say so. Cause she's a real good worker and she's cleaned out closets and cabinets and things that nobody else would, but she thinks she knows more than I do. You know, she probably does! But this is my house and I still know what I want. I'm not... I don't think I've got dementia, maybe I have.

EH: I don't think so. Well I live in Charleston, so I'm not very far away. I could come back.

PM: Well I've been down to the Vandalia Festival. I was down for the first one and I've been down several times since but I haven't been lately. The last time that I was going I had a sick spell. I was, well I got colitis and I took that, I was shaking and I told my daughter to call and tell them why I didn't come, she didn't do it and they didn't invite me anymore.

EH: Uh-oh. How long ago was that?

PM: Well, she's been dead 6 years, so it must have been 10 years.

EH: Mmhm. So is that the last time you performed?

PM: Down at that festival, but Gerry Milnes, he has seen to it that I got money for my songs and he said everybody's singing your songs, it's not fair, you need a tape. And he wrote a story about me in *Goldenseal*—he probably showed that to you.

EH: Yeah, I read that.

PM: And he took me to, well, him and Michael Kline took me and my granddaughter to Washington and Silver Spring, Maryland. We got 100 dollars, well I got 200 dollars but since my granddaughter was helping me cause I was going blind then, I give her a hundred. And mine got stolen.

EH: Oh no.

PM: I hired a girl to come and clean my bedroom when we lived up on Kanawha St. and paid her more than she asked cause she was a good worker but she got that 100 dollars out of my drawer.

EH: Wow, that's said.

PM: But Chrystal, she's done a lot to promote my singing and she's done some singing with me.

EH: Your granddaughter?

PM: Yeah. And she lives between Fairmont and ? but she works at Clarksburg. So she had advertised my CD on the Facebook, is that right?

EH: Uh-huh, yeah. How old is she?

PM: 44.

EH: And does she ever perform by herself?

PM: By herself? Well she has at church, but I don't think... yeah, I believe she did sing some at Elkins.

45:54

EH: Mm okay.

PM: But I, my own Gilmer County didn't pay as much attention to me as they did at Elkins. So I appreciate Gerry Milnes.

EH: Well what did you think of you know, how people reacted to your songs when you would perform on stage?

PM: Well this past year, a member from my church went up, he didn't know there was a program on the hill and he told everybody in church I was the star of the show. But yeah, they seemed to like—I'd get being a hand (?). I never got a standing ovation, but I got a big enough applause. And, yeah, I'm pleased. I was pleased.

EH: How many songs do you think you know?

PM: Well the book that Erynn Marshall put out—she put my repertoire of songs in the back of her book, but I don't, I'd have to think on some of them before I'd, I sing to my helper and she'll say "Well I've never heard that song before." I tell her, I say, "Well I know a lot of songs you've never heard before!" (laughs)

EH: Did it used to be that people remembered some of those songs?

PM: Well some of them would be like you and say, well I've heard that! But not quite that way. And I was in a nursing home for 4 years and they'd ask me to sing "Froggie Went a Courtin'" and I'd say, well I can but I bet I won't sing it like you know it. Don't you even know like "Froggie went a courtin' mmhm mmhm."

EH: Yeah.

PM: I said I don't sing it that way. But I would. I never did sing "Barbry Allen" very much but I did when I was in the nursing home. I sang a lot of songs there. And I give 'em, it's been... Jane was still living when they took me over to the nursing home. But it was my fault, it was nobody's fault but mine that I was in there. I tried making sure being a (sufferer?) I got to week. And I just told Lynn and Jane, I can't stay here any longer. But I realized I was the one that did it and Lynn took me out. I sung a lot of songs and said a lot of poems like some of James Whitcomb Riley's like "The goblins will get you if you don't watch out." Some things I memorized when I was going to school.

EH: Well he's from my home state.

PM: Is he? Yeah that's right! Cause when I asked, see this tape here—I asked for his book of poems. They didn't have them but they sent to Indiana. Indiana is it?

EH: Yeah.

PM: They sent there and got it.

EH: Nice.

PM: So then somebody advertised a book online and my niece told me about and so she ordered it, I paid her, and then after, after somebody read it to me, I gave it to my daughter that lives in Wood County. Now how do you pronounce that—James White-COMB or...?

EH: Whit-come I think. Whit-come.

PM: Well, I've heard it pronounced like that, that's the reason... He just wrote a poem about everything, didn't he?

EH: I know.

PM: I said the "Passing of the Backhouse" at the stage one time.

EH: Oh yeah. So do you think you were unusual for remembering all these songs—did other kids sing them or did other people you know sing old songs?

PM: Once in a while. But not like I did. I know.

EH: And why do you think that was- do you have a good memory?

PM: Well my mother had a good memory 'til she died at 82. But she got hardening of the arteries in her head and eventually it went to her heart and you may think this is silly, but it may not be the reason I remember, but I thought, if I'd hang my head down about 5 minutes a day and let the

blood rush in to the veins and arteries that they wouldn't harden. So that's what I do! So I don't know whether that's... don't know if that helps or not, but something helps.

EH: Something, because you seem pretty good at age 88!

PM: Yeah, I think so. Well, my... I had a brother-in-law but this is not true anymore, but he used to tell people he had a sister-in-law that could tell you what you did and when you did it.

EH: (laughs)

PM: But I don't remember that well anymore but I know enough to... I stay with myself every night. Lynne comes over in the evening because [if I can't?] take my own medicine or open a can of something. But he's... cause I can tell that in my morning medicine I have 2 big long pills. In my evening medicine I only have 1. So I can take my own medicine. I appreciate him coming every evening anyway. And he comes on the weekends too. He's... nobody thinks that he looks like he's 70 but he is. My "Rogue's Gallery?" is down the hall there- my children. And that... I'll tell you something about my husband. He believed in spooks. I didn't. My mother always told me if I was brave enough to go see what it was, it wouldn't be anything scary. But when we moved in that big house there that's painted there on the mantle... by the way that mantle come out of that house too.

EH: Oh, wow.

PM: Somebody told him it was haunted and he wouldn't stay in there my himself. But I have. One night he said—it always amused me because he was quite a bit older than me. One night he said, "Phyllis, Phyllis, get up. Something's coming down the stairs." I got up. It did sound like there was a horse coming down the stairs—that's what it sounded like. Bump, Bump, Bump. And after a while it quit and he goes, we were sleeping and the whole family of us said, well we only had the 2 boys then. He got up and pulled the bed across a chair. I said, well Jesse if it's a spook it will just float right in here and get you! And he sat there and watched that door all night. And I went back to bed! So the next morning in daylight, he said "Phyllis, Phyllis!" I said what?! He said, "let's go see if we can tell what that was." And we went out there in the hall—it was a big old farmhouse, you know. It had big rooms. 16x16. And the halls was 4 foot across. And anyway, a rat had pulled an ear of corn about halfway down the steps. I don't know—we had a perfectly good corn crib, I don't know why he put the corn in an upstairs room that we wasn't using, unless it was to dry quick to take to mill. That did make an awful racket! And that, the stairs creaked and after we moved away, I went back to visit a neighbor and she said, "well you're gone from up there, did you ever hear anything up there?" I said, well I heard an old house creaking. She said... Aunt Martha Killingsworth—that was the people that built the house—said her daughter-in-law pushed her down the stairs one night that caused her, caused her death and then she walked the stairs every night. And I said we had got her first television when we lived there. And I, like I said, I didn't always feel very good. I'd go upstairs to bed and I'd hear something on the television that I wanted to listen to, I'd go down about halfway and sit

on the stairs. And I said, well I bet Aunt Martha was sitting there listening to the television with me and I didn't know it.

EH: (laughs) Yep, maybe so.

PM: I hear things here too.

EH: Really?

PM: I think it's an animal on the porch, cause the dog, I had for a long time seeing eye dogs, but this one isn't because it costs an awful lot of money to train 'em and I don't get around that much anymore.

EH: Yeah. Well this dog seems very sweet.

PM: She watches me.

EH: I see you have an old record player. Do you listen to records?

PM: Yeah. I've got... there's a cabinet there with records. I've got a CD player over there and a tape player.

EH: What do you listen to of other musicians?

PM: Well I've got Gerry Milnes, and I've got a tape of the last, see Gerry sent me people to teach folk songs too. So I've got a tape of the last one I taught. I've got more than one tape, it's just... the other, but that's what I've got over there now.

EH: So you've taught people your songs?

PM: They sent me, let's see... Sonya Byrd, Sarah Colstein, Debby Redding, at least 4... oh Lynne Triplette (?) at least 5. And paid me.

EH: Nice. So that was for the Master/Apprentice program?

PM: Yeah. Mmhm.

EH: So he's helped you pass your songs on to other people through just learning from each other.

PM: Yeah, most of 'em come from my mother and grandmother but I learned others too. And one thing that's popular at the folk festival that some people says is vulgar is Lois Layton was an English professor at Elkins and come down to Glenville... she said the spittin story that she made up herself and some high faluttin' people here at Glenville think it's vulgar, but they don't think it's vulgar at Elkins and they don't think it's vulgar in Washington, D.C. They don't think it's that vulgar in Kentucky. But I heard her do it twice and then I did it a little of my own.

EH: Nice. Who else did you learn songs from besides your mother and grandmother?

PM: Well, off hand I can't... I can't think of anybody.

1:04:18

I like... I got a folk song book from Patrick Gainer and I found some in there that mom and grandma just sung a little bit of that I sung. But he took some of my songs too. Like Mary the Wild Moor. You have to go back to Charleston this evening?

EH: I do yeah.

PM: You gonna come back up to Sutton tomorrow?

EH: I'm gonna try. Are you gonna be there? Are you gonna go?

PM: Well, I couldn't sing, but Gerry Milnes will be there and I expect you've heard of Melvin Wine.

EH: Yes.

PM: Well his son will be there playing the...he did all this work around here. Built the porch, the porches, and put in the ceiling fans and...

EH: And what's his name?

PM: Grafton.

EH: And does he play?

PM: Huh?

EH: Does he play fiddle?

PM: Yeah. A lot of people think he's better than Melvin. But he quit playing the fiddle for a long time after Melvin died and I said... Grafton was here one day and I said, "Grafton I didn't quit singing my mother's songs because she died, I think your dad would want you to carry on."

EH: Right.

PM: And I talked to him this morning and he said he was gonna play the fiddle.

EH: Well that's... maybe I should go!

PM: Melvin couldn't read and write but he got along, didn't he?

EH: Yeah.

PM: Grafton said he knew his money anyway. And you realize, what all do you know about Melvin?

EH: Mostly just his fiddle tunes, I don't know much about him personally.

PM: Well they raised 10 children of their own and then they raised 10 foster children. That would take some doing, wouldn't it?

EH: Yeah, that's amazing.

PM: I expect that he lost suit, don't you? (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Wow. That's incredible.

PM: I think it is too. Course Melvin got all the credit, but when I was there, to his calling hours and Rita took me up to the casket, I said, Melvin had to have a good helper or he couldn't have done all those things.

EH: Right.

PM: She changed her name to Rita, but her mother named her Rita (long I)

EH: Oh, okay.

PM: I know all of... Grafton. I mean, I know their names, I don't know 'em all.

EH: And did they live close to you?

PM: No, they lived up Copen. But they used to have a... every Saturday night they'd play music up there when Melvin was living. They really had a good turnout to that too. And Grafton don't like bluegrass, I don't particularly like it either. I like to be able to tell the words of the song.

EH: Right yeah.

PM: So when they started playing bluegrass, he quit.

EH: Oh wow. So were they square dances up there?

PM: Huh?

EH: Were they square dances up there too or were they just parties?

PM: Well, they had square dances up there too. I never square danced til after I was 50 years old. I was working at the college and Mack Samples had a square dance class in the room right close to where I was working for the food service. And me and another woman took a square dance class with Mack.

EH: Okay.

PM: I've known him for a long time. He got a dirty deal at the college.

EH: And how did you know Grafton and Melvin? From those parties?

PM: Well, no. Melvin and... I knew Melvin he had a truck and would haul coal out of Lynch Run where we lived. And my husband raised watermelons and he sold the biggest ones and then the middle sized ones he told the boys, if they could sell 'em why, they could have the money. And Lynn would always run out, when he heard a truck coming, with one on his head. Melvin would buy 'em. And come back the next day and buy some more. That's the first time. And then Grafton did some work for my sister. She lives on ? Camp and she told me about him. And then, so I got him to come down and then I used to go up to the Landmark Theater and sing.

1:11:33

My husband was a shape note singing teacher but he just knew two or three songs without a book!

EH: (laughs) Did you ever sing shape note?

PM: Me?

EH: Yeah.

PM: Well along with him but I couldn't pick out a song like he could. He could pick out the round notes too. This Chrystal that I've talked about, when she was in the Glee Club at college, she'd bring her shape notes over, her sheet music and it took him a little longer, but he could get it. He was really a better singer than I was. He could sing all parts. And I don't think that Jimmy or Lynne could pick out a song, but both girls could. Our Church of Christ songbooks have shape notes and I remember Jane picked out "Sing and Be Happy" and sung with her dad and said, "Is this the way it goes?" and he said, "Yes! That's the way it goes." And then he talked to the Church of Christ. It's the...um...

(starts to sing "Sing and Be Happy")

My helpers been moping with the Pinesol so I asked her today, use bleach, to see if the Pinesol... cause I've been hoarse all winter.

EH: Oh yeah. Well you know my mother is allergic to pine and she can't use Pinesol and we discovered it because she would always get sick around Christmas with our Christmas tree. And then she discovered she had an allergy and so she can't use Pinesol anymore and she feels a lot better.

PM: Well

EH: You never know!

PM: I just told her today and she has allergies too, so I don't know whether that caused it or not. She did use the bleach today.

EH: Ah, okay. Well I don't want to wear you out too much, but maybe I can come back when you're feeling better and record you singing?

PM: Well I hope to get over this hoarseness before the folk festival.

EH: Yeah, I hope so.

PM: Erin Marshall from Canada—did you see that book?

EH: I haven't seen the book, but I know her- I know who she is.

PM: Well, I'm the only one left that was in that book.

EH: Oh wow.

PM: So that makes me feel old!

EH: (laughs) are you planning to sing at the folk festival?

PM: Yes.

EH: Okay, great. Well maybe I could stop by after or before and record a few songs here at home.

PM: Okay. Well I'll have to get over this hoarseness. Every year, though, I think it's gonna be my last. I went out there with a big hat on last year. When I used to recite—that's my bird clock—when I used to recite long poems that... My mother taught me the art of expression. But one of my teachers, Wise, got me on the stage and she told me if I was afraid to look to the back of the room, so I always did and I've always passed that on to kids I know. Of course I can't see the audience anymore, but not too long ago, well it's been pretty long ago too. But Bob Butcher, he's... all the Butcher lawyers here in town. He heard me talking about the folk festival, and of course he's did now, but he went to the folk festival at the Fine Arts Building and as soon as I walked off the stage he said, "I heard that girl all my life and didn't know she could sing like that!"

EH: (laughs)

PM: So when he died, I was sick and Terry Butcher got my daughter to sing "West Virginia Hills". She said, I think dad would have preferred your mother, but she's pretty feeble. She sung "West Virginia Hills" and then he was in the Navy so somebody sang "Anchors Away." He was the—he wasn't a religious person so they didn't have a religious...I was..

EH: Well I'll plan to see you then, and maybe I'll leave my card with my number so you can give me a call, you know, if you do feel better and I can come by some other time.

PM: You know, I bet it was that Pinesol, don't you?

EH: I think it really could be. You never know.

PM: That's strange, as I told her. She wants to sweep and mop everyday

EH: Well that's good.

PM: And I've been hoarse about off and on all winter and the spring too and I bet that's what it was.

EH: Well, I'll put my card here on the counter, or should I just give it to you?

PM: Yeah.

EH: Right there.

PM: I'll know where it is.

EH: And then, do you mind if I take your photo?

PM: Oh! No! Do you want me to put on my dark glasses?

EH: (laughs) No, that's fine.

1:20:48

END OF TAPE