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Interview with Joe Hickerson Regarding Sarah Gertrude Knott (FA 459)

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Folklife Archives Project 459
Interview with Joe Hickerson (B1,F4)

Tape 1 of 1
Informant: Joe Hickerson
Interviewer: Hillary Glatt
Date: February 24, 1995
Location: Washington, D.C.
Transcriber: Andrew Lee
Sanyo Memo Scriber

001HG: --number one. I'm talking to Joe Hickerson. I'm at the Library of Congress. It is Thursday, February 24th, 1995.

JH: No, it's Friday.

HG: Friday. It's Friday, February 24th, 1995; you're right, Joe.

JH: Happy Poets Day.

HG: Poets Day?

JH: Mm-hmm.

HG: I had no idea.

JH: Piss on everything, tomorrow's Saturday. Poets; P-O-E-T-S.

HG: [laughs] Anyway-- [laughs]

We're here to talk about Sarah Gertrude Knott and the National Folk Festival. But before we get right into Sarah, I'd like to ask you how you got into folk music, what your background is with folk music, how you became involved, and all of that kind of information.

JH: Alright. Well, I was raised in New Haven and in the late '40s I remember my mother--she played piano and she had some song books and, folk song books: *Fireside Book of Folk Songs*, *Folk Song U.S.A.*, and some other collections. And she'd gather around the piano and sing along and that sort of thing. Then in '49 she bought an ukelele because she had used, used to play in college and left it lying around, hoping that I would pick it up and I did. And then they trotted out my grandmother's guitar from Texas and I guess I did enough with it to encourage them to give me ten lessons, pay for ten lessons. And then, then I took some other lessons.

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But I--in 1950 I got enamored with the Weavers because I, they had some big hits there: 'Tzena, Tzena' and 'Goodnight Irene.' And I started to sequester myself in my room and learn all these songs from these folk song books. And I start leading fellow high school students and stuff like that. Then I went to Oberlin College in 1953 and found the folk revival, or little parts of it. Mostly New York City kids with the latest issue of *Sing Out!* and the *People's Songbook* and drafts of songs and Woody Guthrie records and Pete Seeger records and all that. Pete Seeger came and performed my freshman year in '54, and I really got into it at Oberlin.

And when my, when I was a senior I asked Anne, I met Anne Grimes at a party. Anne Grimes was a collector and singer. In fact, I just got a letter from her daughter, because she's eighty-three and is moving and is looking for repository for her collection of thirty Appalachian dulcimers made in Ohio. Anyway, I asked her 'Is there some place to do graduate work in folk music?' And she said she thought there might be; I should write to Mrs. Rae Korson, head of the Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress. Which I did; I got a letter back saying, 'Yes. Indiana University has folk music in the folklore program.' I applied, got in. And that's how I started studying folklore. Started with folk music, and folklore.

HG: O.k. And so then--did you ever go to any of the National Folk Festivals when you were younger? When you were into the folk revival, and in college, and--

JH: No. They weren't in my neighborhood. I'm trying to remember--the first one I went to was in Covington, Kentucky and I can't remember when it was. I can't remember whether it was toward the tail end of my graduate career, like in the early '60s, or right after I had come here. I think it was right after I came here because John Dildine, who I became very close friends with, was active on the board and I guess--I was also courting a young lady in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which is not that far from Cincinnati and Covington. That must be it. So in 1963 or 4, maybe summer. We went to the festival, the festival in Covington. I guess that's
050where I met Sarah and witnessed my first festival. The only other ones I saw where when they were out at Wolf Trap.

HG: O.k. So the one in the '60s, then--can you talk a little about it, that festival. What your impression of it was, what you remember about it, how it was presented.

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JH: Well, I sort of remember scratching my head a little because I was used to two kinds of folk music. One was recreational interpretation like I did, and my friends. And the other was authentic folk I'd come to know and witness, that sort of thing. And here was a festival with kids from Milwaukee all dressed up in costumes and doing Polish stuff, sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon. And that kind of made me scratch my head. Later I, of course, saw older programs, programs of older festivals. And there seemed to be a higher preponderance of actual folk and less of the interpreters in some of the earlier festivals.

HG: So she moved--

JH: I thought it was kind of quaint.

HG: Kind of quaint. She moved from--

JH: Artsy.

HG: What did you say?

JH: Artsy.

HG: Artsy. Theatrical? That it was--

JH: No--yes, yeah.

HG: And was it presented on just one stage? Or had she moved to different performing stages?

JH: I don't remember.

HG: You don't remember.

JH: I sort of remember jamming after hours. Bob and Evelyne Beers I think I met there for the first time. You know, doing a song or two with them.

HG: Now did you just become acquainted with her, with Sarah there? Or did you actually talk to her for any length of time then?

JH: I just got acquainted.

HG: Mm-hmm.

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JH: And, I, I don't remember when, whether she already had an office--she must have already had an office here in Washington. The Nation--the N.F.F.A. I got more--of course, you know, the crowd here in Washington, there wasn't that many people into folklore. And of course they all knew each other. And Rae Korson knew Sarah and I'd--I don't remember--Rae Korson; there were a lot of people she didn't like and I don't remember whether Sarah was one of them. I have a feeling that there was a bit of animosity there. A slight recollection.

But I did have contact with her when I was active in the Folklore Society of Greater Washington, which a bunch of us formed in 1964. Program--two ways: programmatically we co-sponsored some concerts. I think there was a series at the Department of Agriculture auditorium as I recall. And then also the, we co-sponsored a series with, at Ford's Theater. An annual program at Ford's Theater. Although by that time Leo Bernache was pretty much running things over there. But also she availed her off--, her, I guess, relatively new suite of offices in the Dupont Circle building for the F.S.W. board meetings.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: We met at that, that suite for several years.

HG: Mm-hmm. And so, did she ever, did you ever talk to her about her philosophy about her folk festival? About what she wanted it to do at that point in the--

JH: No.

HG: --late '60s, early '70s?

JH: No. I knew some people who were on the board. George Simpson, now deceased. John Putnam, deceased. John Dildine; hope you got in touch with him. No, I didn't particularly get involved in any discussions with her, or--
100probably with John Dildine a little bit.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: Like, 'Why haven't you spent time with us?' He was into a lot of other aspects of folk music, too.

HG: Did you feel that the festival was, at that point, irrelevant? Or, or just problematic? That it was out of

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its time or had run its course?

JH: Well, it was just the kind of affair that was not my cup of tea. Now, when it moved out to Wolf Trap and Andy Wallace and others started being involved then it sort of--I could--you know, some of them--the kind of crowd that I used to, would associate with, got more involved and it became a more interesting festival in my mind.

HG: And this was before it became, before N.F.F.A. became N.C.T.A.?

JH: Right. Well, Joe Wilson came around then and then, then he changed the name because, as he told me, he didn't think an organization should have a name that gave people a very different idea of what they were supposed to do. This was, this was after--what? 1974. I persuaded Andy Wallace over there that really the folk, annual calendar of folk festivals which I was compiling here should be compiled by the National Folk Festival Association. And so we did it jointly and then they did it a couple of times. And it was such a humongous job of work that they gave it up.

HG: [laughs]

JH: [laughs] Then Joe Wilson changed the name so that people wouldn't think they had to do that, I guess.

HG: [laughs] That's funny.

JH: I do remember that she, she was kind of demanding. She was always wanting you to volunteer or help or do something. I guess she was used to getting enough people to do that over the years that that was her style.

HG: Mm-hmm.

Now when it came to Wolf Trap, what year was that? Do you remember?

JH: I'd have to look it up.

HG: O.k.

JH: Early '70s?

HG: Early '70s. How long was it at Wolf Trap?

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JH: I don't know; that's easy to find out.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: Somewhere we have a list of every festival.

HG: Mm-hmm. O.k. Now--

JH: But it was pretty much through the '70s. We have copies, I remember, of part, well, one stage at one festival because of equipment loan. So that must have been '76 or 7, early in the career of the Folklife Center.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: They borrowed a Nagra for one of the stages and we got the tapes from that stage. At least one year, maybe two.

HG: O.k. Now in your capacity as, you know, your job at the Archive of Folk Culture, as far as dealing with papers and things like that, did you, did you deal with Sarah when it was, when she was deciding where to deposit her--

JH: Yes. Well, she was--

HG: --papers?

JH: --kind of, going through her stuff and we discussed about what to do with it. And she decided that she would send a copy here and a copy to Western Kentucky, Western Kentucky being the chief repository. And she worked with Montell--

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: --on that. And I guess I was just as happy that that arrangement was there; that's why--and she was from Kentucky. That seemed fine with me. But to get copies of all the ephemera, that's pretty much what we got.

HG: Mm-hmm.

150JH: Quite a bit of it, as it turned out, we were happy to have.

HG: Mm-hmm. So that was probably in the mid-'70s?

JH: Yeah, I would guess so. Yeah, we can look through some files and--

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HG: Mm-hmm. I'm just wondering--

JH: While you're here, you might want to do that.

HG: --at that stage when you were discussing with her this arrangement, if you recall anything about her or her, anyone she was dealing with, any names. Anything.

JH: No. I just remember she had an older sister.

HG: Now deceased, unfortunately.

JH: Yeah.

HG: Obviously.

JH: And, there was some colonel or General somebody who was her right hand man or, or was--when I first came here, I forget his name, who was sort of president of the board or something like that. [long pause] Nope, I don't recall much more specific about any encounters I had with her.

HG: Mm-hmm. What she--you--I mean, other than saying that she was demanding and always trying to get people to volunteer, what else can you tell me about her?

JH: Yeah. She was expansive, forthright. Far from being the shrinking violet.

HG: Mm-hmm. Did she look at the folk festival as, as--

JH: Her baby.

HG: Yeah?

JH: Her baby, her children, her whole family. I mean, it was her life. I mean, she put an awful lot of time in her life into that. Starting--in what?--1934. Hardly a year missed.

Now, we have resources here. We have recordings of the, all, or some, of the 1937 festival in Chicago recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell [?] who was recording for the Resettlement Administration at the time. And here's an interesting thing. In the--by 19--well I guess from the start, but certainly at that '37 festival, there are a number of performers of non-English language traditional music and dance. And Sidney Robertson, not Cowell yet, recorded some

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of that and got some leads which led her to Minnesota to record Finnish stuff. And one or two other leads which made, made her a collector of non-English language as well as English language folk song. Which led naturally to her work at, in the California collection.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: I point over here because that's what Cathy--

HG: [laughs] Right.

JH: --which became the sort of first systematic documentation of a number of, of a wide range of ethnic folk music groups in a region.

We have extensive recordings of the 1938 festival which were done by the U.S. Record Company. Sixteen inch transcriptions, at Constitution Hall. I'd play an example. I do, I must put together a lecture on women folk song, women in folk song. Or women folk song collectors. And--

200well actually I did it first for, a lecture I put together on folk music in the Washington, D.C. area. And I have a segment where she introduces, or--Texas Gladden sings [sings lyrics], 'There was an old man lived over the hill.' 'The Devil and the Farmer's Wife.' And you hear the laughter of the audience; it's a very good recording. And then you hear at the end, and she says, 'Well those ballads have lots of verses and, but they're authentic.' And then, then she says, 'And you don't have to go to the, far away Virginia to find authentic folk music. Here's a group of students from Wilson High School in our very city.' And they, they sang a, like a Hoosier Hot Shots version of 'Careless Love.' You know, four kids. And so I, I played a, I actually used that in the women folk song collectors lecture, too.

HG: So she really mixed--

JH: A good recording.

HG: --those two things. And she had this idea about the--I mean, she used the term 'survival' and 'revival', you know.

JH: Did she?

HG: Yeah. She actually did--

JH: Oh, o.k.

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HG: --in some of her articles.

JH: Yeah.

HG: That, I guess, so from very early on she was incorporating both kind of authentic, quote-unquote traditional acts and the kind of student--

JH: And interpreters.

HG: Interpreters. Mm-hmm.

JH: Right. And all the international stuff.

HG: Yeah. So the international stuff--now, you were saying back in '37 or '38 that she was incorporating non-English language performers. Was that, do you think that was a rare thing at that time?

JH: Oh, no. I don't know. International folk dancing was already a thing. So, that's something I don't know that much about. There were certainly groups that did their own traditional traditions, like the Polish groups from Pabst Blue Ribbon. You know who you ought to interview? Of course, or get in touch with, is the guy who puts out *Viltis*. It just occurred to me. I'll have to look up his name. He's Lithuanian. He still puts it out; he must be about eighty-five. And his group was at that 1937 National Folk Festival and I suspect a number of others.

HG: I think that I've seen some stuff on him in her files, actually.

JH: Oh, yeah. He's been active for years and years.

HG: That's great. If you could get me his--and he's still alive?

JH: Yeah.

HG: Because everybody I look at in those files, I think, 'Oh, no--'

JH: I get those issues; those issues still come in. Yeah, he's out in Colorado.

HG: Colorado?

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JH: Mm-hmm. His magazine is *Viltis*, which is Lithuanian for 'life'? 'Hope.' Hope.

HG: For what?

JH: Hope.

HG: Hope?

JH: I think.

HG: So, do you remember any other performers or anybody who performed at the festival who might--or anyone who, who has performed recently at the festival that you might know that had performed when Sarah ran the festival? Or--

JH: I don't know; maybe if we looked through some of the fold--, folders, I might think of some.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: A lot of what we have--the ephemera is boxed up and 250 in the stacks because there's so much of it. But we have some folders.

HG: O.k.

JH: We'll do a quick check on.

HG: O.k. So, but the time you knew Sarah--I mean, it was just acquaintance; you never, you didn't spend a lot of time with her?

JH: No. I, I performed at least one. Probably more of the festivals when they were at Wolf Trap. I remember--

HG: And by then she was--

JH: --a ballad workshop I was on with Lou Killen and Almeda Riddle.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: Which impressed me because I sang, I sang 'The Battle of Antietam Creek.' Almeda Riddle got all excited about it.

HG: [laughs] But by then was Sarah pretty much out of the

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picture? Or was she still--

JH: I don't really remember exactly what period of time she was shedding the mantle.

HG: Now, tell me a little about Leo Bernass [sic].

JH: Bernache.

HG: Bernache. Was, is it B-E-A-R-N-A-C-E?
Something like that?

JH: Bernache. He was-- B-E-R-N-A-C-H-E.

HG: C-H-E O.k.

JH: Well, he was a guy who--what? He was from Canada and he had run an opera company. And so he was just plunked down to be executive director of this organization and the festival because he had done that in the arts, but not in the folk arts. So it was a case of--well, we, we scratched our head over that. He doesn't know a damn thing, you know, folklore, folk music. So like Jim Morris, when Jim Morris took over the Division of Performing Arts at the Smith-- the then young Division of Performing Arts at the Smithsonian. You know, an arts person but not a folk arts person, trying to run a folk festival.

HG: Mm-hmm. Now, Sarah chose him? Is that--she was--

JH: I guess, yeah.

HG: Yeah.

JH: Must've. Yeah, there must've been a job opening and he was hired. And I guess through him we continued to have our meetings, F.S.G.W. board meetings at the suite there. Then they moved to another suite, a bigger one I think. And then he was the go-between for the annual event at Ford's Theater: 'Songs of Lincoln and the Civil War.'

HG: So to clear up a little bit about the relationship between N.F.F.A. and the Folklore Society, there wasn't any kind of animosity or anything like that. The, the changeover of N.F.F.A. to N.C.T.A. was not the impetus for the creation of the Society. It was already created, right?

JH: What, of F.S.G.W.?

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HG: Right.

JH: Oh, no; that was back in 1964.

HG: Right. O.k.

JH: And that was, that got started for a variety of reasons, part of which was caused by the folk song boom and 300partly in reaction to it. Because we wanted to do things that the boom was not doing. Bring artists, foster self music-making, and get the word out of more authentic folk music that the boom was not catering to.

HG: Mm-hmm. And so the Folklore Society's annual festival at Glen Echo--

JH: Yeah, that started later and it got confusing. That's why, one reason why Joe moved the National Folk Festival, because there were three festivals. Two of which were free. They had to charge out at Wolf Trap. And so that's where they got the idea of moving it, having it in different places.

HG: Which is what Sarah had done in the past.

JH: Yeah. Yeah, she'd come back to some favorite places.

Oh, we have some recordings from St. Louis in the Anne Grimes collection.

HG: O.k.

JH: I'm not sure if they were actual, actually done during festival events. But certainly some of the people who were at the festival she recorded after hours or whatever.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: In the '50s. That would be early '50s, I think.

HG: So tell me--

JH: Anne Grimes.

HG: Anne Grimes?

JH: I just got a letter from her daughter. She's eighty-three and lives in Granville; look up her.

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HG: Grenville [sic]?

JH: Granville, Ohio. Where Denison College is.

HG: O.k.

JH: Yep. Great lady.

HG: Well, that's not so--Ohio is close to Kentucky.

JH: Yeah.

HG: That might be feasible.

JH: Uh-huh.

HG: So when you performed at Wolf Trap for the festival, you say you did that at least once.

JH: Yeah, probably twice. Maybe--

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: --three times.

HG: So they were still--do they still spotlight interpreters? Or do they--

JH: No.

HG: No. They only--

JH: Joe hasn't done that.

HG: Mm-hmm. But--so, in this--but still in the mid-'70s they were still--

JH: Yeah.

HG: Now, where you there more as a performer or more as, as a--

JH: Presenter.

HG: --as a presenter or instructor.

JH: Both.

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HG: Both.

JH: Both a presenter and a performer.

HG: Mm-hmm.

JH: Yeah, different workshops. Thematic workshops: ballads, religious songs, stuff like that.

HG: O.k.

JH: But we've got all the programs. You've got all the programs.

HG: O.k. Well, is there anything else you think, can think of right now?

JH: Well, not at the moment.

HG: O.k. Then I think it's time to get to work on other matters.

JH: Do you want to come down and start looking at some stuff? Just to get a feel for it.

HG: Yeah, I'll just look through the, some of the files that you have available and--

JH: Right.

HG: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW