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Interview Conducted by Margaret (Bulger) Kohn with Freeman Kitchens (FA 566)

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FREEMAN KITCHENS COLLECTION

TITLE: Interview with Freeman Kitchens

LOCATION: Drake, Kentucky

DATE: September 22, 1974

FIELDWORKER: Margaret "Peggy" (Bulger) Kohn

INFORMANT: Freeman Kitchens; Owner of Freeman Kitchens Grocery; record collector; president and founder of the Carter Family Fan Club

TOPIC: Kitchens as Record Collector and President of the Carter Family Fan Club

TRANSCRIBER: Jennifer M. Jameson, WKU Folk Studies; 2011

TECHNICAL NOTES: Transcriber makes educated guesses on all mentioned names, with no certainty of their accuracy. Original tape had "CT-37" written on it.

DISCLAIMER: For perfect accuracy, refer to the recording. This transcription is as accurate and complete as possible. In any question of interpretation, the researcher is referred to the recording itself as the primary document representing this event.

Peggy Bulger:

September 22nd, 1974. I'll be talking to Mr. Freeman Kitchens, head of the Carter Family Fan Club in Drake, Kentucky. Peggy Bulger-Kohn.

Um, well first of all, Mr. Kitchens, when and where were you born?

Freeman Kitchens:

I was born here in Warren County.

PB: Right here?

FK: Yes.

PB: And how long ago was that?

FK: Oh, that was September the 18th, 1926.

PB: Oh, my goodness. Have you always lived in Drake?

FK: Well, yes. Just around Drake. I was born across the way.

PB: Well, when you first were in Drake—and in the area here, do you remember the first radio that was brought in? How were you first introduced to music, was it people in the area?

FK: I guess the old hand-cranked phonograph was the first.

PB: That was the first? [Laughter]. Was there anyone in your family who played music?

FK: Well, I have cousins who play music. But nobody in close relation [to me].

PB: Were your cousins living near you?

FK: Yes.

PB: They were? Um, tell me about them.

FK: Well, they were my uncle's boys. They played music, and they were played on the radio some, I think.

PB: Oh, really? Oh, what are their names?

FK: They are Gene Kitchens...I think they call one of them "Chuck." But they played with Otis Blanton and different groups like that.

PB: What kind of music do they play?

FK: Country.

PB: Country music? On the banjo?

FK: Well, and guitar...

PB: When you first started listening to it, you never played anything yourself? You were just listening to it?

FK: No.

PB: How did you get started, well—say, how did you get started as the Carter Family Fan Club President?

FK: Well, I started collecting the records, see?

PB: When was that?

[2:30]

FK: Forties, I guess...the 1940s. About '51 or '52, I believe, I heard from A.P. Carter saying something about fan clubs, or some way to get the records going again. See, they were recorded for ACME, I believe.

PB: That was after they were on the radio, then?

FK: Yeah. Yeah, you know ACME— it was him, and Jeanette Jo, and Sara.

PB: Oh, right, before [the four?] they were back in Virginia. He was back in Virginia by then.

FK: And, uh, they recorded somewhere in Kentucky, wasn't it? Campbellsville or...

PB: Yeah, I think that ACME label was in Kentucky. I'm not sure.

FK: And I guess I started just to help [the goals?], and also just to help me find all the other [Carter Family] records that I had not found.

PB: How did he find out about you?

FK: Well, I had written him, I believe—or the ACME Record Company, asking about different records, you know.

PB: I see, okay. And so he asked you to kind of start it?

FK: Oh, well, he didn't say a fan club, but some way to get their records going, and to let all their fans know, and so, I just formed a fan club. But, the Carter Sister already had one – Miss Frances Lyle had started one, and put out one journal for it. So, I had been corresponding with her, and so we all just combined it into one, and I ended up with it when she gave it up.

PB: Oh, so when did you start?

FK: In the early fifties.

PB: Now, was this about the time that you got together the “Disc Collector” magazine?

FK: Yes.

PB: Well, how did that start?

FK: Well, this Joseph Nicholson in Michigan had it going, I believe, and asked me to help with it. You know, I put records for sale in it, and information on the artists that I could gather.

PB: And anything that you would happen to know...articles that you had written up?

FK: I had written an article on the Carter Family for it once. And, I believe Archie Green told me it was the first that he'd known to be written about them.

PB: Oh, wow! So, in other words then, this was back in the early fifties when you were doing this with Mr. Nicholson, and what happened to that magazine anyway?

FK: I don't know, he just quit, or something. And the last I heard it came out in this new—

PB: Delaware?

FK: Delaware.

PB: So, he did all the printing and things like that?

FK: Yes.

PB: Now, when you started the Carter Family Fan Club, how did you get in touch with all the fans?

[5:30]

FK: Well, I had already known a lot of people who collected their music, see? And, of course, others knew of others and they'd tell them about the fan club. And we would advertise in the little old country music papers.

PB: Oh, that's a good idea.

FK: And the Carters also announced it at their appearances, Maybell and the girls.

PB: Well, when the Carter Family Fan Club first started, it was all together and it wasn't like is now, where you're the head of the old Carter Family Fan Club and is there another one for the girls?

FK: There another one for the girls, I think.

PB: Right, yeah. Yeah, I think that's right. So how many people would you say you have in the Fan Club right now?

FK: Between 300 and 400, I think.

PB: Wow, that's quite a lot. How did you start? Was it that many when you started?

FK: No, 25 or 30 people!

PB: And as time went on, would you say that over the years—was there any time where you got a whole bunch of fans at once, or did they just trickle in?

FK: Well, different members would send in several new members at one time – they would get other people to join. And then, we had some little advertisements created that Maybelle and the girls would give to their fans that would come and talk with them after their shows, and I'd get a lot that way.

PB: Now, it's kind of funny how you started out being the Fan Club president. Were you more interested in the Carter Family than anybody else?

FK: Yes, that's the one I started with.

PB: And then from the Carter Family you started collecting all of these [records].

FK: That's where I learned about the other material from other artists.

[9:10]

PB: Right. What would you say that—well, what would be your second favorite group?

FK: Well, I have so many, I wouldn't know. I suppose Mainer's Mountaineers, and Uncle Dave Macon and...

PB: Those are mostly groups recording in the 1930s, right?

FK: Yes.

PB: Yeah, the older bluegrass and the older country. Now, you have quite a few holdings, as you know...and you also collect 78 records...

FK: I usually put those on tape—

PB: Yeah, right. And then you just save them?

FK: Save them, or, you know, maybe sell them, or trade them for something I don't have?

PB: How many would you say that you have?

FK: Oh, about a thousand, I guess.

PB: About a thousand, boy! And there are...some other things I wanted to ask you. You have about 300 or 400 in the Fan Club, that's quite a few. What's your favorite Carter Family song?

FK: Oh, I have so many. I guess "Wildwood Flower." That's most everyone's favorite.

PB: It is just because of the instrumental, or the singing?

FK: Yes, both.

PB: And I've noticed from listening to their radio transcripts that they're divided half between spiritual numbers and blues and some other things. Their spiritual numbers—where would you think they got those? Were they in tradition, or did they write some of those?

FK: I think both. They got a lot of their songs from a colored man that lived close to them, I think, by the name of Jackson.

PB: Jackson?

FK: I believe that was some of their religious songs.

[12:20]

PB: I know also, they had a black chauffeur—Leslie Riddle? He supposedly gave them some of their blues numbers. Now, I don't know if that's true – I haven't researched it enough. And I know that some of their songs they got from their mother...A.P.'s mother used to sing. You interviewed some of them...Maybelle and Sara?

FK: I have some tapes by them, and Sara tells a lot about where all those old songs came from...the best she remembers. She doesn't remember too well on some of them. Of course, she's written some of them. A.P. didn't write ALL of them, you know. I think she did the "Lonesome Time Special," you know.

PB: Oh, really? I didn't know that because most of the publicity is all A.P.

FK: Mhmmm. But she did do four or five, I'm sure.

PB: And she's living in California, now?

FK: Yes.

PB: That's what I thought. Well around this area, do you have many members right in this area, or no?

FK: Not too many. I guess most of my members would live in Virginia, Tennessee, Canada—I have quite a few there.

PB: Oh, wow. And in your store—do people ever play music around in your store? I noticed that everybody gathers around and tells tales.

FK: Well, not in a long time. Years ago, they did.

PB: Tell me something about the store. How did you get started in that—did your father run it?

FK: No, the other people who owned it, I worked for, for five years before I bought the store. I guess the reason I bought it is I was appointed post-master, and I couldn't very well have one without the other. [Laughter]

PB: When was that?

FK: Oh, in '51 – November.

PB: '51...so this is back around the time you started getting into collected music.

FK: Yeah.

PB: So, you were appointed post-master and you bought the store. Was it in the same place that it is now?

FK: Yes, it is.

PB: Oh, that's good. So, from then on you've owned the store and run the place, too. I noticed there's quite a lot of people gathering there. It seems to be quite the gathering place.

[16:20]

FK: Yes. Well, there's only one in the community.

PB: How many are in the community?

FK: Well, I don't know.

PB: Well, how many post office boxes do you [have]?

FK: Well, I did have rural routes, but I only have federal delivery, now – 75 boxes. But, the rural routes go right around the area that's Bowling Green, now.

PB: Do you have a regular crew that usually gathers here?

FK: Well, more or less.

PB: And you said they used to play music?

FK: Well, there were some that used to play music around the stove. Not lately, though. I guess that was back when I worked for the other people, then.

PB: Oh, well then...are there any musicians right in this area, right now?

FK: Well, up in Simpson County...I believe I told you about the guy who writes songs and records them, and takes pictures of them – Mr. Milum. He's the only one that I can think of. He's on the road most of the time, now.

[END at 18:00]