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Interview with Alan Jabbour Regarding Sarah Gertrude Knott (FA 459)

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Tape 1 of 1

Informant: Alan Jabbour

Interviewer: Hillary Glatt

Date: February 28, 1995

Location: Washington, D.C.

Transcriber: Andrew Lee

Sanyo Memo Scriber

001AJ: And now I'm talking. Can you pick me up?

HG: Yes. O.k. Here we are. It's Tuesday, February 28th and we're in Alan Jabbour's office at the American Folklife Center in Washington, D.C.. And we're here to talk about Sarah Gertrude Knott and the National Folk Festival. This is a joint project of the Kentucky Oral History Commission and Western Kentucky University.

So, Dr. Jabbour, instead of delving right into Sarah, why don't we start with how you came to be involved in this whole thing, presentation of folk culture.

AJ: The whole--how did I ever get to Washington? I was in graduate school at Duke University and thought I was going to be a medievalist but took a course in the ballad, a graduate seminar with Holger Nygard. This was in my first semester in graduate school in '63. And I was quite smitten. It was an exciting seminar; it was an exciting subject, an interesting professor and it actually stimulated what was already growing in me which was an interest in folk music and, you might say, folk culture at a larger level. And so after taking that course I decided, having listened to Library of Congress field recordings and other things that he played for us, that--well, if other people had collected traditional music, traditional song--since I played the violin, I could specialize perhaps in traditional instrumental music. And I began recording old-time fiddlers in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, and doing research comparatively on the history and development of that tradition. And of course, like all cultural traditions, once you get into the specific tradition, it lures you more and more into looking at the larger culture out of which the specific tradition arose. And you might say I was converted to an interest in folk music and folklore.

I taught at U.C.L.A. and thought I was settling down to a comfortable professorship in '68. I was then--I had agreed to edit an album, a documentary album, for the Library of Congress on American fiddle tunes. And thus I became closely acquainted with the people here in the Music Division of the Archive of Folk Song, as it was then called. Imagine my surprise when I was visited by the chief of the Music Division who, after talking to me there at U.C.L.A.

for what seemed an interminable visit, suddenly said, 'Would you be interested in coming to Washington and the Library of Congress?' So before I knew it, here I was at the Library and starting a new career only a year after I had started my academic career.

It wasn't long after I got here, I suppose, that I met Sarah Gertrude Knott, though I can't say exactly when it was I met her. But I quickly became acquainted with her, not only as a living person but as a historical personage. Because we at, in that archive, had a collection of material from the National Folk Festival from the early days. Sound recordings, manuscripts. I think there's maybe some scrapbooks and other documents that sort of tells part
050of the history of that very interesting festival. And Joe Hickerson, who was already here as the reference librarian for the Archive, had done some poking around into the history of the folk festival movement in this country. And he and I talked about it and I, I quickly grew aware not only of the present National Folk Festival at the time--that was '69 and '70--but also of the history of that and the history of this whole genre of cultural enterprise. Sarah, somehow, either met me or I met her, probably soon after I came. And the National Folk Festival was still in action in that period and by then had worked out an arrangement at Wolf Trap. Wolf Trap--well, we can do the history on this. But we should figure out when it was open first to pub--, to the public.

HG: It was, it was right around the time that the festival started going there.

AJ: Back here.

HG: Yeah, it was, it was almost simultaneous, I think.

AJ: So, what--do you have the year? It must have been in the early '70s.

HG: Yeah, I guess it was. Are they celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary? Or just about, I think.

AJ: Could be.

In any case, the National Folk Festival did appear at Wolf Trap, I guess, maybe from the outset of Wolf Trap's being launched as a, as a center for the performing arts. And presumably Sarah had worked out the arrangement. I went out to the festival; she probably invited me. I can't reconstruct it at this point. And I found it very interesting. It had this feeling of being an interesting phenomenon but, but a

phenomenon in which a little bit of the life had gone out of it. And this happens in any genre that is successful so that people keep doing it and sooner or later, you know, imperceptibly and gradually it sort of wears out its freshness and loses its zip and imaginative quality. And it becomes just a sort of an, an agglomeration of accumulated contacts and networks over a long period of time that is sort of brought up once again to present to the public. That was the feeling I had. And I didn't feel that in a hostile or negative way. I was actually rather touched by it and I thought, 'Boy, it was--some of the people who were there, it was probably very exciting to see them presented for the first time twenty years before.' But somehow or another they had become a sort of a, a pat formula for a festival. And I had this sense, which I found that others shared, that it was a historical phenomenon that sort of either would gradually die or needed some kind of rejuvenation.

Sarah invited me to certain other events. I think she decided that I'm the new head of the Archive, she should maintain contact with me. And, and so she invited me to other events around town, events where she was trying to mobilize support with this or that organization for the 100 festival. And I remember attending a number of such events at her invitation.

I had a sense that she was plucky and energetic. She was one of these strong women that started things on their own in the cultural realm in the earlier part of this century. And I, I already then realized, but since then I've come more to realize, that this, this was a very--this is a story to itself, the story of these strong women sort of going it alone and carving out something on the face of the earth in the face of rather formidable odds. But having a little bit to go on, because somehow or another the, the cultural realm had been partly ceded to women. And that gave them a niche, but only a niche. They still had to scramble and fight for every ounce of support they got. And for many of them, like Sarah, I think life was a long history of scrambling against terrible odds and somehow making good things happen. So I admired her for this.

But she was becoming elderly and, as I say, the festival was becoming a little bit of a, a formula without new life being breathed into it conceptually or humanly. And so that's the way it seemed. At some point, either she began to realize that herself or other factors seemed to overtake her and the next thing I knew there was talk about a transition from Sarah to the next generation.

The person that, that I remember from this next generation was a fellow named Leo Bernache. Leo was a, a promoter and, theater and concert and other sorts of events producer. Who had somehow gotten into a collaboration with Sarah on things as a--[coughs] Sarah seemed to picture Leo as her successor or he pictured himself as sort of moving into this niche now on a permanent basis. And so Leo set up shop. He obviously was new to the field of folklore and folk, folk cultural presentation. And, he wasn't a proud fella; he didn't pretend he knew more about it than others. He made efforts to try to link up, but I think he had trouble winning the confidence of people who did know about this field. And there was an anxiety about whether he adequately represented things. Somehow there was, this was a brief interlude in the history of the festival and I can't now conjure up how many years--

HG: Not many.

AJ: But before long, I heard rumors that, that the board was going to oust Leo. And a number of people who I knew were involved in that board. My memory of that board is a little clouded because other people may have come on later, but it seems--

HG: But you weren't on the board?

AJ: Hmm?

HG: Were you--

AJ: I was not, myself, on the board. No. I was not. I 150 seem to recall that Dick Spottswood was involved in the board at the time. And I think perhaps Chuck Perdue was involved and--I can't recall who else was involved. Somehow or another I have the recollection that Andy Wallace had already become part of the National Folk Festival team. Maybe he was assisting Leo at the time, but he actually was perhaps the transition. Or the one person who survived the old regime into the new regime. And the new regime--well, I know they wanted to throw him out, Leo, for one reason or another. I think it basically wasn't working. But they were less sure of who they would get to replace him.

And I know that at the time a fella named Joe Wilson had been coming and visiting the Library, and visiting people around town. And Joe had been involved in folk music and country music, if I could make the distinction. That is to say, he grew up in northeastern Tennessee and was sort of involved in the local traditional culture of the region. But then became involved at one period in his life with country music

and bluegrass in Tennessee and elsewhere in the Appalachians. Joe then got involved with other jobs; he worked for, for I think a union newspaper for awhile in Alabama. And then he ended up as a fund raiser in New York City for a, a legendary New York fund raiser who had the account for, amongst other things, the consortium of black colleges in Atlanta, a project that Joe worked on. This was back in the '60s and '70s, a long time ago.

But Joe loved folk music still and was starting to hang out with the, the folk music crowd. You know, he was sort of a, a smart sophisticated country boy who knew his stuff but also knew about the wide world as well. And, and so I remember myself suggesting to Dick Spottswood and others, 'Why don't you check out Joe Wilson? He's up in New York, but I have a feeling he wouldn't mind living further south than he does now. And I'm sure his wife wouldn't.' His wife at the time was from either Tennessee or Alabama. And they had southern connections. And others may have suggested the same thing; I don't want to claim that I was the one who crowned the new prince, you know. Because, if they did their homework, they probably asked a number of people the same question. But sure enough, they ended up talking to Joe and the courtship grew intense. And the next thing I heard, Joe Wilson was the new director of the National Folk Festival Association.

And Sarah must've stayed a little while longer in Washington, but at some point she moved back to Kentucky. I don't know when that point was and--she may have actually always had her home in Kentucky and actually just commuted back and forth; I'll bet she did.

HG: Well, her sister, they--her sister and she had a house there, in Princeton,--

AJ: Right. Right.

HG: --that her sister lived in. So--

AJ: Princeton, Kentucky; that's right. Because I think we, in our archives and in our correspondence files, have correspondence from the early years on forward with her from Princeton. I remember, myself, corresponding with her there.

On balance, I think she made a great contribution to the development of the idea of the folk festival. Like many people with creative contributions, her great contribution probably occurred primarily in the first five or ten years of her work. And thereafter she tended to, in effect, coast on the idea she had created in that formative period. But

she, she did a very important thing that Joe Wilson actually revived. And that is she invented this idea of moving the festival around the country. And one year it would be in St. Louis, one year in Chicago, one in Washington. And that way the idea of a folk festival as a presentation idea was presented in different parts of the country to different audiences and thus I think created the possibility of both keeping an overall format but changing the content each time. And also created this instrumentality for conveying ideas about folk culture to a broader audience everywhere.

So it was a brilliant idea and I think to Joe Wilson's credit, he revived in another time the same idea and, and has made it work now. And part of what's now exciting about the National Folk Festival is exactly that idea of Sarah's, of--that it, it's a, a travelling show presenting the idea of folk culture to different people in different parts of the country. Well that was Sarah's idea and a great idea. Sometimes great ideas are simple; they're simple once they've been thought of and we've gotten used to it. But she's the one who thought of it and developed it and--she might have gotten it from--I don't know who she got it from, but she might have gotten it from Barnum and Bailey for all I know. But, but nevertheless, it was a terrific idea.

It might turn out, if you study it, that in matters of inventing the format of the folk festival, that this festival was very important, too. There were other early festivals but, in a sense, it was a genre aborning. It was a, it was a form of cultural expression itself, the folk

250 festival, which was being invented as it went. And so there was no set way it should be or shouldn't be. They had to make it up. And probably by gradual experimentation they hit on patterns that seemed to work, and worked consistently and effectively, and gradually selected out those patterns as the patterns that became the structure of the festival as we know it. I suppose the National Folk Festival was not the first in the genre; there were other festivals, like White Top and Jean Thomas's festival in, in Ashland? Where was it?

HG: Yeah, Ashland.

AJ: Ashland, I believe. But the National was national. It moved the idea from a regional audience to major urban metropolitan areas, then moved it around as well. It enlisted a number of prominent folklorists. George and Rae Korson worked with her, for example at one time. Ben Botkin worked with her. A number of folklorists of that generation lent their energies and expertise to trying to make this enterprise work. And I think it was a great success and represented a, sort of a permanent contribution of our

field. When the folk festival was reinvented in the '60s, it clearly wasn't wholly reinvented; it clearly tapped into the ideas that were already there, partly with the National Folk Festival, and reconstituted them through first the Newport Folk Festival and then the, the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. But all of these festivals are clearly part of a larger festival genre that the National Folk Festival has a key importance back at the beginning in shaping and defining nationally for all of us.

HG: Now I'd like to ask you if you have any recollection of Sarah and the American Folklore Society. And her relationship with the professional field.

AJ: My sense--I don't have a recollection. So I should, I should say that this is a sense rather than a recollection. And that--the American Folklore Society met in Washington in those years and she may have been there, but I can't clearly recall whether she was there or not. I don't think she was a regular in the American Folklore Society's meetings. So if she would it was just because it happened to be convenient and it gave her an opportunity to see some friends. My sense of her from the world of
300folklorists looking out is that she was somebody who was sort of historically connected but not thought of as somewhat, not thought of as a folklorist so much as she was thought of as a festival organizer who had had contact and intercourse with our field. So I don't think she was thought of as of the field, but she was thought of as related to the field.

And it's hard to distinguish what people thought of her from her generation, which was probably generally approving, from what people thought of my own generation, which was, you know--like all young people, we probably thought of her, in a way, as being sort of this old-fashioned person who was still sort of stuck on her rut that she got into long ago and that couldn't get out of it. But a person who seemed sweet and nice who we could not bring ourselves to say bad things about. But neither did we rush to, to help her because she was always on the lookout for help. And so, you know, if you were a clever young person you probably tried to be nice and evaded her at the same time, because you didn't want to get swept up in her--because she would quickly have something for you to do if, if you did. So I think I'm reflecting my own feelings at the time when I say that. In fact, I would want to say now that I probably feel warmer to her and actually not only more kindly, but more admiring now than I did when I was young. But that's typical of young people. They're not so admiring; they tend to be more critical, you know. And I was probably like that myself.

HG: What did she try to get people to do? What do you remember--

AJ: Oh, she always was trying to rope people into helping her with this or that effort in putting the festival together. You know, 'Help me with this; help me with that. Can you do that? Do you know somebody who can do this?' And unlike people of the old generation, you know, she would write letters and--and she wrote letters to, repeated letters to people if she was back in Princeton. You'd look at the mail coming in and you'd say, 'Oh my gosh, here's another letter from Sarah,' you know. 'What does she want me to do now?' And, so that's what I guess I'm trying to convey. But I'm trying to convey it objectively about myself, too, because I'm conscious that young people are sometimes unduly impatient of older people of this sort.

HG: Well, I guess I would just want to know your own--I guess you didn't know her so well personally. It was more on that sort of nebulous--

AJ: Social.

HG: --professional, social--

AJ: Social, social.

HG: --level.

AJ: Social and professional. Well enough that she would write. She would visit. And she would invite me to events that she was orchestrating. I remember being invited to an event, it must have been at the Canadian embassy, where she was trying to get help from the Canadian embassy to bring certain Canadian folk performers to the National Folk Festival. And she actually had some of them in town. And the event started as a conventional reception and then sort of turned into a presentation of the folk by Sarah for the rest of us standing around with a drink in our hands. And I remember my vague discomfort at the time about the whole thing.

But then again, it wasn't bad. And that's sometimes what you have to do to, to get people to help you. Well that's what I mean when you get people to help you. And so she was, she was constantly enlisting and recruiting. But that's what you have to do to make something happen on a shoestring, when you don't have assets of your own. You're constantly stitching it together through the people you know and trying to make something happen out of nothing. So hence my

current tone of admiration for her and my confession that I was probably a little less admiring when I was young.

HG: When you talk about the festival getting a little tired, a little pat, can you give some specific examples of what you noticed about the festival then?

AJ: Well, I think there were specific performers that she hit on to and she decided they filled a niche in the performance. Plus she could, they became reliable performers. She knew that if she asked them, they would say yes. And she knew what it took to get them there and get them home again. And, and thus they became a sort of a reliable niche-filler. And I don't want to name particular names here.

HG: That's o.k.

AJ: But I think the phenomenon is well-known in any sort of 400production operation. You start mentally filling niches in your mind. 'Well, I can get this person and I can get that person.' And so instead of thinking, 'I'd love to have something from Canada,' she might think, 'Who can I get from Canada? I know so and so; I'll call them. They can come.'

But that same group or individual may have come to other such festivals as well. And so it becomes a little tired after awhile because it's the same people showing up representing the same symbolic slots in, in the larger aggregate. You know, this represents folk dance of Canada.

And this represents Appalachian singing, you know. And this--what you need to do in any such thing to keep it alive is to constantly question your own judgement of last year and, and redefine things and bring in things that almost challenge the very verities that you created the last two or three years, you know. It's the only way you can keep it a living, breathing organism that, that develops creatively over multiple generations. [telephone rings] If you don't do that-- [TAPE IS PAUSED]

HG: That's o.k. A phone call's a phone call.

AJ: Now I lost my thread.

HG: We were just talking about how, I guess, Sarah didn't take stock at the end of each year and kind of--

AJ: Well--

HG: She instead--

AJ: I can't say flat out that she didn't. She probably perforce had to take stock. Because even if you have a formula in

your mind, if you're doing it by, by this sort of process of inviting this person and that person, you're gonna lose some. Somebody can't do it and so you gotta figure out something new. So you might say that events may force you anyway to be creative even if you intend to use the people that you've always used. However, I did have a sense over all that, that it was more stitching together already known quantities than it was introducing new ideas.

450 It was also a little bit of, of presentation of things that look like--well, the sort of thing that, that some folklorists nowadays talk about sometimes. In fact, sometimes with an unduly negative tone of voice. They talk about, you know, like ballet folklorico presentations and stuff like that. Well, there was a little of that and, that had crept into some aspects of the festival presentation. And so you've got the paradox that you got one singer that was really a classic traditional singer and then another group that sort of represented a, a sort of a standardized formulation of a certain cultural tradition that was now routinely done for public performance. And it was a little incongruous having these all cheek by jowl in the same festival.

Now the truth is that some of those folklorico presentations that many folklorists now sort of look down their nose at, actually are interesting in their own right culturally. But everything depends, in presentations, on how you frame it. And I think with Sarah there was, there was no apparent distinction between them in the framing. You know, it was all folklore, or something. And this was the sort of thing that would, of course, set many professional folklorists' teeth ajar a little bit. And, so I think the younger generation was impatient with her and the older generation was more tolerant. Partly because older people are more tolerant and partly because they probably still remembered the contribution part of it. And it was a little less obvious to them that in certain ways that it had gradually stultified or become concrete-ized in a way that needed rejuvenation. I'm struggling for words here.

HG: [laughs] You never struggle for words, Alan; you're doing fine.

Well, I mean, I don't think that we need to make this a prolonged conversation. If you had anything to say about 500 her presentation style or if you remember the way she--you know.

AJ: Toward the end especially, she also--I think there is a role that you might call the *grande dame* role. And I think women

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of that generation who had, against all odds, succeeded and made something were conscious of that role and started to move into it. So as you grow older you sort of act a little bit like a *grande dame*, you know. And I think I can remember her, herself, coming out on the stage, you know, and, and uttering things about the things that we had just heard or were about to see. And I can remember feeling a little bit of it as in the *grande dame* style. At the personal level I think she was a sweet and energetic person; I don't think she was at all stuck up or, or haughty or--and as I say, my balanced view of her is that she was one of those astounding women who, against all odds, managed to make something happen out of nothing. You know, and ultimately I think such people ought to be credited for their accomplishments.

O.k.?

HG: Well that's about a half an hour.

AJ: [laughs] No wonder I ended the sentence.

HG: [laughs] Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW