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Interview with John Ramsey Regarding Sarah Gertrude Knott (FA 459)

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Tape 1 of 1
Informant: John Ramsey
Interviewer: Michael Ann Williams
Date: August 10, 1995
Place: Berea, KY
Transcriber: Andrew Lee
Sanyo Memo Scriber

Side A
Counter #

001MAW: This is Michael Ann Williams and it's August 10th, 1995.
I'm talking to John Ramsey in Berea, Kentucky. We're
talking about Sarah Gertrude Knott. [tape is paused]

--set pretty well here. Why don't we just start out--you can
tell a little bit about your own background and how you got
to know Sarah Gertrude Knott.

JR: O.k. Well, I graduated from Berea College and that's where
I met folk dancing. And so I've been involved in folk
dancing for my entire life since then. And of course it was
through that that I met Sarah Gertrude Knott. I believe--
I'm fuzzy on it. I met her and I think it was probably at,
in Berea, at the Christmas Country Dance School, which
started in 1938. Of course I wasn't here then, but it would
have been probably sometime in the early '70s that I met
her. And maybe a couple of times. I think maybe she was in
Berea some other time and I believe that I had been in
conversation with her on the telephone at the Campbell Folk
School. I was director there from '66 to '73.

MAW: Oh, I didn't know that.

JR: And I believe she called up there several times. And, and
my impression of her is that she knew how to badger people
[both laugh].

MAW: I've heard that, yes.

JR: I mean, she didn't let you alone and she--in other words,
she was very communicative; she, she would contact you and,
and let you know what, what she wanted. I never did accept
any of the invitations to the National Folk Festival.

And I've been thinking about that since you called, about why I
didn't. And, I think that the two of us shared a, an
affection for folk, the folk arts, and wanted probably some
of the same things to happen but our approach was a bit
divergent. Her, of course her, her biggest contribution was

the National Folk Festival. And that was staging, putting folk arts on the stage. And my orientation was more to keep it alive by using it, keeping it in the community, just having ordinary people enjoying it as a daily part of their lives. And the staging aspect of it is a bit dangerous, when that's your intent, because it alters it.

MAW: Yeah.

JR: And I'm sure that she was aware of that and she wanted to have things--that's why she kept after me, I think, is because we had something that was a part of the community that you could say was real. And certainly a lot of the European folk arts become--oh, what would be the word? Professionalized, maybe commercialized. Likely [both laugh]. But that's still not quite the, the right word. Staged.

MAW: Mm-hmm.

JR: They become staged and artificial, a bit artificial. And not exactly what you think it is. And I hear discussions of this at times and nobody seems to know what to do about it. So I didn't go to a National Folk Festival. I would have loved to have attended one of them; I never did get to attend one. But I knew enough about the festival and about Sarah Gertrude Knott because she had a reputation. I heard people talk about her. And--

MAW: What sort of reputation was that?

JR: As a character [both laugh]. And certainly my own experience had bore that out on the telephone and, and when I met her in person, you know, she was sort of after me. In her--no, what's another adjective? I want to say jolly or winsome but that's not quite right. It, it had a bit of badgering, too. But it was all in good humor.

MAW: Yeah.

JR: She was pleasant. A pleasant badgering, yeah.

MAW: Was she sort of--

JR: But she wouldn't let you go.

MAW: I got the sense from some of her letters that she was very self-conscious about the fact that she was pestering people in some ways. I mean--

JR: Is that right?

MAW: I'm asking you in the sense--did you get the sense--

JR: I, I don't know. I don't know about that. But she may have found out that that's the only way to get things done. She did get things done. And that's one way to do it. In fact, maybe the only way [both laugh]. Yep. I, I rather enjoyed her.

MAW: Yeah.

JR: Now my predecessor, Ethel Capps, here, probably had some of the same experiences with her. And she did take her to, I think it was St. Louis. But I think she also had some negative experience as a result of the staging part of it. And when you're a part of a big staged event, why, you have your little spot and that may not have been enough for Ethel Capps [both laugh]. I don't know. Because she was a character, too. I'd put both those women in the category of "characters" [both laugh]. And I'm very fond of Ethel, of course, but she also has some interesting sides to her. You always had to stay on your toes.

That's about all I, I think I heard at one point that she had a-- and I tell this to you as a researcher because it may affect what you hear and I don't know if anybody will tell you or not. I don't know personally if she had trouble, some trouble with alcohol or not.

MAW: Hmm.

JR: That is a rumor--

MAW: Yeah.

JR: --that was going around. So I pass a rumor on to you. But I never saw any indication of that. I had no reason to 100believe that. I've known other, other people that did have a problem with it and still made a big contribution, so--

I, when I heard about the *Kentucky Encyclopedia* and that they were soliciting entries, why, I wanted to see that folk dancing had a good representation and made a list of all the names that I thought ought to be in. And so I sent it in and, I guess Kleber came down and I had a session with him. He felt it would be best to consolidate some of the material and so he asked me to do a, one of the more larger entries on folk dancing in Kentucky. And, but do a separate one on Sarah Gertrude Knott and on Paul Rush. I also put his name in. So I have three entries in the encyclopedia. And that was an interesting experience. I, they, they

really wanted you to document everything that you had. And, you couldn't make any claims, that they were even born, I guess [both laugh], without having some sort of documentation and authenticizing it. So, that was, that was a good experience for me and Sarah Gertrude Knott was certainly the challenge [laughs].

MAW: Yeah.

JR: I went over the papers that I have. I didn't keep all of my notes but I have some of them. And I've tried to reconstruct in my mind the sequence of events. But I had--I know that, I had the impression that she graduated from McCracken County High School. Well, they wanted that documented. And I called the school, and they had no record of her ever having attended.

MAW: Oh, really?

JR: I have that paper here. And then I found that throughout her educational career that she made claims, or intimated, that she had attended and--maybe she worded it in an accurate way but I'm not so sure. She implied that she had taken courses here or there and elsewhere.

MAW: Yeah, I mean, she sort of says "studied at." I've, I've noticed this, kind of all very sketchy and vague about her education.

JR: Yeah. And so I tried to follow up on some of that and found a few interesting things and--so I had, in my entry, I was very careful and put down only what I was pretty sure was, was true. [Reading a letter] McCracken County Public Schools, from Bob Steele, Director of People/Personnel. "This is in reply to your letter concerning the graduation date for Sarah Gertrude Knott from McCracken County High School. We're sorry but we have researched our files and can not find any school records for her." So, that's--and, 150and by telephone, when I called them back, why, they could find nothing. I thought, well, maybe there was another, another school, you know. Or maybe she didn't graduate. But they had no record of her.

MAW: Yeah. I've seen copies of her vitae which I think say McCracken County High School.

JR: Yeah, yeah. So I assume that that one is right and that they've just lost their record. But the Spencer--well, let's see. Washington University. They said that she had transferred there from N.C. State with thirty-eight credits. Now, I thought that that was good; at least she did have

some credits that they recognized, from Washington State.

This is, this is what your--

MAW: Yeah, I've seen that.

JR: Let's see. Education. Dorian Private School, Paducah, Kentucky. King School, Bush Conservatory. Georgetown College, that one I followed up. Regular college courses. Now, where did I--you have that, too, I guess.

MAW: Yeah, probably.

JR: University of North Carolina. No, that's just--I, I called Elizabeth Holston and they directed me to Alumni Records Deceased. I'm trying to run it down. I called the Washington University Arts and Sciences Alumni, the registrars office in the older records. They have her down as going to preparatory school at Georgetown, 1928 to '29, for one semester. That's the record that they had, and that she transferred thirty-eight credits from UNC. And she transferred in June 1930 to the Bush Conservatory. So she took some courses at Washington University. And I'm going to be going, moving to St. Louis--

MAW: Oh, really?

JR: --so if you need any follow up there [laughs]--

MAW: Yeah [laughs]. Great.

JR: --I'd be glad to do that.

And Georgetown College, I called Admissions and the Registrar. She attended one year, from 1919 to 1920. Did not receive any degree or certificate. So--

MAW: Yeah, I've had a hard time trying to piece together those first several decades of her life. There isn't--the information is so scanty.

200JR: So I, that's, that's what I found. I just remember having the impression that this woman probably liked to drop a nice vitae and, and show that she had, was well-educated. But in fact, it looked like maybe she sort of went here and went there and never found exactly what she wanted [laughs]. So that's, that's the sense that I got from dealing with all this, whether it's true or not I don't know. Maybe you can find out.

MAW: Hopefully I'll find something out, yeah.

JR: So that's, all I've told you, everything I [laughs]--

MAW: Everything you know.

JR: --know about her.

MAW: So most of your contact with her was when you were at John C. Campbell rather than in Kentucky--

JR: Here.

MAW: Oh, here.

JR: At Berea. Yeah, at the Christmas School. That's when I--

MAW: Oh, o.k., that's right.

JR: I'm certain that I met her face to face, here at Christmas School. She attended for a day or two, stayed at Boone Tavern. Ethel Capps was around and, it may have been even 1973, the first year I was here. Ethel was still directing the program and I know that she--it, it could have been then because that was Ethel's last Christmas School and we had a big party and all.

MAW: O.k.

JR: I think maybe she came up for that. But she was sort of up in arms that she was coming and was warning me, you know, watch out for this woman [both laugh]. So--

MAW: She ought to be an interesting person to talk to, too, then.

JR: That's for sure, yeah. Ethel is a delightful mixture of elegance and mountaineer. She would fly to New York City to buy some clothes. So she would wear these elegant clothes and she would sit there with her legs straddled [both laugh]. Had a big party. Delightful mixture.

MAW: Well, I appreciate sharing, you sharing what you had. And if you can think of anything else, or, I'll leave a card. I don't--do you have an address or some place that I can contact you?

JR: Yeah. I can give that to you.

End of Interview