

Beverly May Interview
with Abby Huggins
July 5, 2017
Whitesburg, Kentucky

00:03 Abby Huggins: This is Abby Huggins. Today is July 5, 2017. I'm sitting at Summit City Café in Whitesburg, Kentucky with Bev May for an oral history interview related to the Food & Dance Trail. Bev, can you introduce yourself?

00:22 Beverly May: So, I'm Beverly May. I'm from Floyd County. I grew up on Wilson Creek in Floyd County. I still live there. And, what else can I tell you?

00:40 AH: Can you tell me more about where you were raised and who your people are?

00:45 BM: Ok. Well, Wilson Creek is in kind of in the more southern end of Floyd County. It's a holler. And, the place that I lived was, I guess my great grandfather bought it in the 1880s and it was passed down through the family. And, the, with the parcels of land getting smaller with each generation. But, so I was raised by my parents and my brother, who's younger than me. And we, I'm trying to think what all to say. Daddy worked his, pretty much his whole career, for the gas company. There is a compressor station at the mouth of the holler. And, my mom is an RN [Registered Nurse] and she was at home some when she was raising us. Sometimes she'd go back to work. Mostly, she was home. And, this would have been in the [19]60s and [19]70s and so, of course we kept a big garden. And, that was where our food came from. We had a freezer full of beans and corn and various vegetables. And, of course, blackberries out of the hills. And, we kept, for one of my uncles, we kept cattle on the place. And, for that, we got half a steer each year. So, we had, so that was our food, pretty much [laughs]. Pretty good, pretty sweet deal. What else? Let's see. And, I left Wilson Creek to go to college at Morehead State in [19]76. And, then lived out in, after college, I went and lived for three years in Seattle, worked in a women's shelter. And, then, a couple years into that, I found out about Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, that was the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition then. And, about the second or third issue of *Balancing the Scales*, their newsletter that I got, there was an ad looking for organizers, folks to work as organizers. I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but it was in Floyd County and it had something to do with fighting Broad Form Deed and so, I applied and I came home and was hired and became one of the early organizers for KFTC. And, they placed me out in Somerset and told me that my territory was everything west of I-75. So, I worked at that for three years and we got the Broad Form Deed Amendment passed during that time. Well, we got the bill passed, the amendment came later. And, then, let's see, just kind of free forming here.

04:35 AH: Can you talk more, explain more about the Broad Form Deed? And, maybe talk more what your work looked like as an organizer?

04:45 BM: Yeah. So, in [19]62 and [19]63, my family was informed that there was going to be a surface mine coming along on the property and that there wasn't a damn thing they could do about it. And, that's because their, previous generation of my family, but earlier on, another family had signed a lease which was transformed by the company at the court house into a deed which gave all the mineral rights to the company and the surface rights, according to Kentucky's court at that time, the mineral owner had more say-so over the property than the surface owner. You basically didn't own anything but the air above your property. And they could get to the coal

however they saw fit and put roads wherever they wanted to and leave a mudslide in your kitchen, like they did to one of my neighbors, and on and on. Anyway, it was really traumatic for the family and it was really abusive of people. But, this was an experience that was common to many, many people of my generation. And, I knew early on that a really terrible injustice had been done and grew up seeing the effects of what happens when there's a really irresponsible mining just up the hill from you. So, I was, really wanted to do something about that. And, so when KFTC got formed, and I realized that that was one of the issues that they were looking at, then I was ready to jump and come back and join the fight, so, that's what I did [laughs].

06:52 AH: And what did you do as an organizer?

06:54 BM: What do you do as an organizer? It's just really strange and difficult work. You try to work with people one on one to get a sense of what the issues are that are concerning them in their community and work as groups to address those issues, whatever they may be. What I was working on as a state, and KFTC's kind of strange because it's sort of an amalgam of local organizations, chapters, who work, who get support on their local issues, like technical support and organizing support, but then they're also a part of a larger whole that's working on state issues. And the state issues we were working on then were the Broad Form Deed and then the unmined minerals tax. And, then the local sort of issues we were working on were people who were directly affected by mining. And, then, there was a little community that had a garbage dump that was sort of devouring the community. That they suspected was a chemical dump site. And, then there were some gas issues in another county. It was that sort of thing. Yeah, I guess that's what you do [laughs], pretty much.

08:38 AH: What year was the Broad Form Deed legislation?

08:48 BM: Oh Lord, we got the bill through the legislature in [19]84 and then it was declared, no [19]86, and then it was declared unconstitutional by the state supreme court. So, our thought was then, if it's unconstitutional, we've got to change the constitution. So, we went back to the legislature to get an amendment to the constitution, In Kentucky, it's very, very hard to do that. It's kind of set up, it's not like California where you're going to have a referendum on this that and the other, it's a big deal. They can only do two amendments in one year's election. And, Kentuckians have a tendency to vote against amendments, if they don't - when in doubt, vote against it. So, it's very hard to get through. So, you have to get through the legislature then you have to have this statewide election. So, in [19]88, I think because the Broad Form Deed was such a, such an emotional and well known justice issue, injustice, at the time, the people of eastern Kentucky really rallied together. And were able to get support down state. So, there was a large campaign around it. And, not a campaign in terms of money. Not large in terms of money, but large in terms of energy and people willing to tell their stories and go down state and talk to groups and so forth. So, that actually all happened when I was in nursing school. I left working for KFTC to go to nursing school because I felt like I needed a job that would have some future to it and steady income and that would give me some freedom to live in Floyd County, basically. So, anyway, we won that when, I'm trying to remember what the percentage was, 80 - I want to say 86% we won. It was the second highest win on a constitutional amendment in Kentucky behind the vote to give 18 year olds the vote. So, it was historic. It was really, it was a big deal. So, we won that one. That's while I was in nursing school, I was real active at that time of course. And, yeah, it was exciting times. And that was at the [19]88 election.

12:04 [Recording paused for background noise]

12:05 BM: What was the question again?

12:11 AH: You were talking about Broad Form Deed when you were in nursing school. And, you were talking so much about the energy that, the success of that. That people all across the state were rallying behind. Sounds very exciting.

12:30 BM: It was, yeah.

12:32 AH: Not to jump ahead, because I'd like to hear more about your nursing school experience and on from there. Just thinking about comparing that to today, that political energy.

12:42 BM: Right. Yeah. That's a great question. I think, I think that the Broad Form Deed campaign was really exciting and really important for KFTC because it was a really unifying issue. There was almost nobody who would say, "Oh, I think it's good for a coal company to come and strip mine somebody off their land. Sure they ought to do that." Nobody said that, except for the coal company executives. It was pretty obvious they were the bad guys. It didn't happen overnight. That built up because of years of abuses. Plenty of people had seen the cover of the Courier Journal with the house that is halfway over falling down the hill because of one of Barkley Sturgill's mines. That kind of, everybody had seen the pictures of the Widow Combs being pulled out of her property. It was just part of the ugly landscape of Kentucky. And so, when people finally got a chance to do something about it, they knew just what to do, which was go vote. So that was, so we're not there now. We're unfortunately, I would have a hard time thinking of too many issues where you could, where people feel completely united and in agreement on much of anything. Maybe the only thing, I think whenever we recently had the ugly visit by the Neo-Nazis, I think there was some good unifying energy around that. But that's not the kind of battle you want to be fighting [laughs] too often, if you can avoid it. And now, that's sort of dissipated. We don't really know what became of the Nazis or what impact they had. Hopefully not much. But yeah, this is a much more polarized and awkward period because it's a little risky to even talk with somebody about what their feelings are on a lot of issues. And, people around here try real hard not to insult each other if we can help it. So, just asking how you voted can be the start of a really downhill conversation [laughs] that you don't want to have. So, yeah. I guess that's kind of where we're at [laughs].

15:55 AH: Yeah. But you've continued to be involved with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

16:01 BM: Yep.

16:03 AH: Since the early days, through it's changing its name from the original. Could you talk a little more about different issues that have come up after that?

16:15 BM: Wow. Gosh. One's that I've been involved in?

16:22 AH: Sure.

16:24 BM: We, I know we, for a while were dealing with clear cutting in the southeast Kentucky because there was a factory that made manufactured wood. So, we were kind of dealing with that.

I don't know if we made any progress or not. And, trying to think. I know in Floyd County, there was a welfare rights group that formed of women who had, for whatever reason, had to become, had to enter the workforce and so they were looking at welfare rights and support for getting through school, sort of thing. I got to know them, not real well, because I was, where was I then? I was probably down in Leslie County. What else? And, I guess the big one, the really big one was, so, I worked for many years for Mary Breckenridge, and lived down - well nine years actually. Lived down in Leslie County and was active in that chapter. But, in 2014, no, 2004, I went to work for the free clinic in Hazard. And, then a couple years after that, in 2006, my mom and my brother and sister-in-law went to church and a neighbor told them that the Miller Brother's Coal Company was going to be doing Mountain Top Removal on both sides of Wilson Creek, the whole length of Wilson Creek and that they'd already approached five land owners and four of them had already signed. And, wasn't this wonderful news? That we were going to get this opportunity. Yeah. Of course, it wasn't wonderful news and they came home from church in a state of shock. Told me, and I just, I was, I grieved for days and I was just totally freaked out because I was building a house, I was building my house then. And, coming home from work at the clinic and sanding sheetrock on the ceiling and putting in light fixtures and on and on. I was getting towards the end of building it and here was the coal company that was going to come in and blast the foundation out from under me. I was just devastated. So, anyway. I didn't set out to become a Mountain Top Removal activist, but when they bring it to your doorstep, what are you going to do? So, that really really pulled me in deeply for quite a few years. And so, we had our little holler had a whole series of meetings, but we did a lands unsuitable for mining petition. And that was partially successful, but mostly, it was ultimately successful because as it spun its way through the process in the courts, it delayed the time of the mining. And by the time that it failed at the Kentucky Court of Appeals, they didn't really want to coal anymore because the gas had boomed. The natural gas was booming and the coal market bottom had dropped out. That was in 2012, something like that. So, it took a long time to spin out in the process. It was just pure dumb luck [laughs] with a whole lot of organizing and effort behind it. So, that got me pretty active in KFTC in a big way. KFTC was just invaluable. I really felt like we had the whole state organization really solidly on our side, rooting for us, it really felt good to not be alone in that kind of situation. And, let's see, I guess that brings us up to the present day, which is, present day activism has been, well, helped get the Floyd County Farmers' Market started back. Well, we started, our Floyd County Chapter started the Growing Appalachia Conference, which is a conference on Agriculture and Energy that happens each Spring. And, right after that first year, I met Todd Howard, who then asked me if I was interested in helping getting a farmers' market started. And I thought, well, why not? Let's do it. So, we had the first farmers' market in, gosh, what year would that have been? 2007 or 2008, and with two farms represented. But, it was fun, everything sold. So it got bigger the next year. Todd Howard really was the driving wheel. He really nurtured it along until it became a really good sized market. And, let's see, what else? And then, we had our, like I said, the incident with the Nazis coming and we did some organizing around that. And right now, we're dealing with the, we're dealing with the attempt of the Congress to undo Obamacare. And so, I've been active in that, of course. So, I guess that brings us up to present date.

23:22 AH: With your activism.

23:24 BM: Yep.

23:26 AH: Well, can you talk more about your career in nursing and healthcare? And more about what has motivated you in that?

23:40 BM: Well, I think if there's a theme to it, it has been that I really wanted to work places that doctors didn't want to work and wanted to take care of people the doctors didn't want to take care of. And, I really felt like that I had a niche there. Because when I got started, I worked at the Mud Creek Clinic for three years and that's a whole set of stories. But, it was a community health center. And, I had the delightful job of being the RN/Health Educator. So, I basically got to make up my job. So we had a really great program for pregnant and parenting teens, called the Resource Mothers Program. And, gosh, I got to do a lot of one on one education, health education with folks and then all the usual nursing stuff you have to do in a clinic. And, what I was aware of was that the women folk were not getting the care they needed: their pap smears, mammograms, and all that stuff because all of the staff were men and they just did not want to fool with it. I mean, the women didn't want to be fooled with and the men didn't want to fool with it, both ways. It just wasn't a good conducive atmosphere for women's health. Although, I think it's a really good clinic in a lot of other ways. So, I got it in my mind to go back to grad school at UK [University of Kentucky] and I became, I ended up being unintentionally the first family nurse practitioner they turned out of their Hazard program. And, then I went right to work for Mary - well, it was Frontier Nursing Service in Leslie County. Like I said, I did that for nine years and worked mostly at the Beech Fork Clinic up a holler, up the head of the holler, well, it wasn't the head, but up the holler where you would never believe there would even be a clinic. And it was my scene, I guess. We had a doctor that would come, I can't remember, it's like a couple hours once a week, maybe. Maybe every other week. But other than that, I was the only provider and yeah, it was pretty cool most of the time [laughs]. Sometimes, I wished I'd had a lot more help. But, I really enjoyed getting to take care of folks, the whole family, the kids, the grandmothers, everybody in between. And, I loved it that, I loved it that the community really welcomed me and appreciated me being there. It's really nice. There's just a really good historic relationship between the nurse practitioners and the communities with Mary Breckenridge. There's a lot of really good positive history there. So, it felt good to walk into the middle of that. And then, 2004, well, in 2003, I started volunteering at this free clinic in the basement of the Catholic Church at Hazard. And, that was real exciting because I - uh-oh - [music plays in background]- as soon as I heard there was a free clinic, I chased them down and volunteered because I really felt like there's a whole bunch of people not getting the care they needed. So, I wanted to do something real direct about that. Do we need to, what do you think?

27:43 AH: Let me pause [recording paused for background noise]. Ok.

27:46 BM: Ok. So, I started volunteering at the free clinic and after about a year, they sort of demanded my résumé. I guess they had, I don't know. But they demanded my résumé and hired me, so. From there, that started my adventure at the free clinic and I was there seven years and all we took care of was people without insurance all day long. And, as I always said many times, we gave them all the primary care they could stand [laughs]. There's a lot of other things besides primary care we couldn't provide, but, we could at least provide good chronic care management and take care of their blood pressure, diabetes, all those good things. And, I loved it. It was really, I really enjoyed, I enjoyed and took a great deal of pride in taking care of folks that had been shut out of the healthcare system. And of course I've got all kinds of horror stories of how that can affect people and a pretty keen sense of what happens when you don't have health insurance, which is why I'm pretty freaked out right now about the rolling back of the Medicaid expansion and all. So, I did that seven years and we had this wonderful president called Barak Obama who was able to push through a wonderfully comprehensive health care bill and I realized that my

particular specialty of taking care of the uninsured wasn't going to be needed. And, also, I was starting to appreciate the limits of what you can do seeing a patient one patient at a time. So, I got it in my head to go back and get a Doctorate of Public Health to try and look at ways to improve population health besides taking care of folks after they're sick. To try and do, as a population, create more healthy - to make this a healthier place. And the other piece of that that sort of dove tails in, at the same time, I was fighting this whole business with the Miller Brothers and the potential Mountain Top Removal. And because of that, I ended up reading the Michael Hendrix studies, where out of the West Virginia University, where he links coal production and the level of Mountain Top Removal surface disruption in communities to a whole host of chronic diseases and birth defects. And that really disturbed me. And, I remember sitting there thinking, all of these studies are coming out of West Virginia, but nobody is looking at Kentucky. And, who could do that? [laughs] It dawned on me, oh, I could do that. Somebody needs to. I will. So, I went back to school, I started the DRPH program in 2012 and at this point, I've completed all my course work, I have not however finished my capstone on black lung. So, that is yet to be done and slowly, slowly, slowly happening. And, because of going back to school, I got hired by the University of Kentucky College of Public Health to work on the project I'm right now the project manager for, which is a study of asthma and COPD in Letcher County and Harlan County. So, I've been working on that for two years. I guess that gets you up to date on my life history. Yeah, uh-huh. [laughs]

32:21 AH: Yeah, it's interesting where things can intersect, different passions can come together.

32:30 BM: Yeah, you would think that activism and nursing would be two different domains, but they sure haven't been for me [laughs].

32:41 AH: You mentioned getting the farmers' market started. I'm wondering if you could talk more about food? And its role in your community, in your life?

32:57 BM: Well, I guess the - I've always kept a garden from at least the times I've been living someplace where I could have a garden, I've had a garden. Even if it was just a little postage stamp of a garden. And, that just, because I guess because I grew up helping in the garden as a kid that just seems like a normal thing to do and why wouldn't you do that? As opposed to why would you? And, so, I think in part because of the Growing Appalachia conference, I really started seeing the potential for small scale sustainable farming to be one of the many, many replacements we'll have to have for the coal industry. And so, I was really tickled to do my little part in Floyd County to get with the farmers' market. I got out of that last year because I had a terrible deer, devastating deer attack. And I just gave up trying to sell because you kind of have to be able to keep your commitments on what you're going to bring to the market. And last year, I showed up with garlic and that was about it, so, because that was the only thing they didn't need. But, anyway, yeah, I'm convinced that small scale sustainable farming is completely compatible with the landscape and the traditional farming methods and sensibilities of mountain people and as - and I'm not the only one to think that. And, each year that passes, I see more evidence that that was right. There are people now who are making their living through agriculture who had been working for the coal industry. I think that's pretty astounding. So, anyway, at this point, I'm just a gardener and just a, right now I'm breaking beans in a big way. So yeah, I guess that's about it on that part. [laughs]

35:40 AH: Yeah, and you were talking earlier about having enough shucky beans to have at Thanksgiving with your family.

35:50 BM: That's right. Yeah, we've got a crazy onslaught of white half-runners coming in. My mother thinks that white-half runners are the only green bean that matter, that's the only green bean you need, the only one you should have. So, we always grow half-runners. Although, they're not a bad bean, they're just not the only bean. I like fall beans a lot and various kinds. So, anyway, my brother went overboard, so we've had beau coups of white half-runners coming in. And, my plan for tonight is to pick another big mess and put them in the dehydrator so I can have shucky beans for Thanksgiving dinner, which is a big family tradition. And, what else is going on in the garden right now? I've got some leeks that are doing quite well. The deer haven't bothered them because they're an onion family. They're doing well. And, I've got some fall beans coming on. It will be a while, but I'll have fall beans hopefully, and squash. Squash, squash, squash, all varieties, yeah. A little out of hand on that too [laughs]. And, oh, one of the most fun things I think about the garden is that I've got a great nephew who's ten now and sense he was about six, he's been a pretty regular gardener. And, he'll, at age eight, this child hoed out a fifty-foot row of green beans. Yeah, better than an adult, it was amazing to see him in action, he's really good with a hoe. And, so, that's been a lot of fun is having a younger person in the garden with me, really neat. And, he this year, he grew carrots and him and his papaw made a carrot box. And filled it up with sand and potting soil. We didn't even try to use the normal soil in the garden because of the weeds. And then I found the kind of carrot that's short, very short and round. The French market carrots. And so Matthew has succeeded in growing carrots in eastern Kentucky, it's amazing. He brought in a big old handful of his carrots over the weekend and there were pictures made because it was just a great shot, [laughs] all these overflowing fistfuls of carrots. And he's doing watermelons, so those are coming on good now. And, the garden game got a lot easier because my brother bought a tractor about five years ago, so that's made it a lot easier to actually plow it up and stay ahead of it. So, that's been a good thing. And we have two gardens, side by side, his garden and my garden. His is the more conventional, good long straight rows of potatoes, good long straight rows of beans. And mine's kind of weird, a little of this, a little of that, kind of strange looking, but more weedy too, unfortunately. It is a fun thing, it's definitely a fun thing to do as a family. I really enjoy it. And we enjoy the produce, it's a good deal [laughs]. On Saturday, we had company, my oldest nephew's wife and little baby, two-and-a-half year old came in for the weekend and we fixed meatloaf, which came from Will Bowling in my freezer and squash casserole and potatoes - oh, roasted potatoes and green beans of course. And it was just wonderful. I didn't have to go to the store for any of it, it was all in the garden, in the freezers, so it was great, it was a low stress, just had to go pick it. That's my idea of a really good summer meal, just eat what you've got out in the garden [laughs].

40:56 AH: I'm also curious to hear more about the role music has played in your life.

41:05 BM: Oh wow. Oh, ok. That's a good one. How we doing on time? Because that's a big one.

41:11 AH: We still, I still have some time if you do.

41:15 BM: Oh great, alright. Let me see if I can give you the download on that. So, when I was in college at Morehead, I worked in a women's shelter and my last year of school, and I came home from the evening shift one night and my apartment that I shared with two other girls was filled with musicians. And, I didn't know it at the time, but there was J.P. Fraley, and John Harrod and

Tona, or not Tona, Jane Harrod and Nancy McClellan. All these people who were going to be my dearest friends. And that was the first time I met them. And what happened was, there was a little festival and one of my roommates had just invited everybody to come on over and they did. So, it was an amazing night. And I had never really heard old time music before, I don't think, in that kind of really good, intense kind of way. So, somehow or another I made up my mind that when I was in nursing school at UK that I was going to learn to play the fiddle. That I was going to move back to Floyd County, I was going to learn to play the fiddle. After I started, when I started working at the Mud Creek Clinic, the physician assistant there was a guitar player in the Bottom of the Barrel Bunch, which was about the only string band that was actively performing in eastern Kentucky. And he basically said, "Oh, ok, well if you're going to play the fiddle, then you need to go to Mount Airy for a festival and you ought to go up to Vandalia." And so, one summer, I think it was 1991, me and my best friend went around to all these festivals and kind of got hooked. And I took my fiddle with me and JP started showing me how to tune it and how to get started and became a really good friend. And, Cathy, by the end of the summer decided she was going to learn guitar, my best friend Cathy. So, we started learning as beginners together, which was a lot of fun and very slow progress. But, we knew how to go to festivals and have a good time at the festivals. And, so, and the context for this was to hear old timey music, I was mostly having to go to West Virginia for gatherings and festivals. And, I only knew three fiddlers in eastern Kentucky at that time, JP Fraley, Jamie Wells, and Marion Sumner. That was the only three. And I just assumed that if I actually, because I was in my early thirties, I figured that if I succeed in learning the fiddle, I would be the last fiddler in eastern Kentucky. I just assumed that. I just didn't see it happening. That seemed to be a dying thing. But anyway, so, long before I should have, oh, I know what happened, sorry. I need to back up slightly. About three years into this, into trying to learn, another, made another friend who's a bass and guitar player who was teaching at the Hazard Community College. Jean Boyer. We started playing music together, just to get together and have fun. Really, really just funny, fun guy. And, somehow or another, we got into this conversation, "Well if we started a jam session that wasn't just us, if we open this up, maybe there's more people that we don't know. Maybe more people would play music. Maybe we would find more people to learn from." And so, we started the Appalshop Old Time Jam. And to our great delight, people did start coming. They started coming from Virginia. People come over the mountain from Wise and stuff. And, it was rugged that first couple of years because we would have like, we would have things go really badly wrong. Like, we'd try real hard to put word out there that it was an old time jam but sometimes you'd have like somebody show up with an electric bass or yeah that didn't quite fit. Or a great big resonator banjo and you know, bluegrass style. It was real. But, at the same time, we had Hobart Crabtree coming real often and Paul Smith and Burt Hatfield came real often. And, just a bunch of folks. And, I started about that same time, I got pulled in to the WMMT as a Saturday morning old time music disc jockey as well. So, we had an old time show that went on for a long time. And we tended to play not just the older recordings but contemporary musicians. Because my thing was, I wanted people to realize, it wasn't a dead music, it was a living tradition. People in the here and now were playing it. And, so, that kind of fed into it. But, anyway the old time jam has been going for twenty-two years. It's still a happening thing first Saturday of the month from October through May. And, so, out of that, I met Roy Tackett and Dave Daugherty and Jamie Wells. Well, I'd known Jamie already. And ended up getting asked to be in a string band. Which I shouldn't have done. I'd only been playing for like five or six years, I really wasn't, shouldn't have done it, but I did. And, so we were the Trough Slopers and I did that from, oh gosh, I don't know, maybe 19- let's see, maybe 1996 to 2000, something like that. So that was fun. We played a lot of gigs. And, for the most part, it was a good time, mostly. Although I wouldn't recommend being the only gal in an otherwise guy string band.

Because it's like having four husbands. So, you know, they all think they can tell you where to be and what to do when you get there, you know [laughs]. So, yeah, that was a good time.

49:33 BM: And then, for me, I guess the, what would you call it? The big bang for me of old time music in this area happened in 2000. I went to, I kind of ran away from home and decided to quit my job at the Beech Fork Clinic and take the summer off. Because when you're a nurse practitioner, you don't have to worry about getting a job [laughs], you can just do that. So, I took four months off and I spent ten of those weeks in, or was it twelve, yeah, ten weeks in Ireland. And I went to a lot of festivals and a lot of little towns. I backpacked. You could, the great thing about Ireland is the places where the music is the strongest tradition are these little out of the way places that you can walk to. Really great. So, with backpack and fiddle attached to it, I got to do the west of Ireland pretty thoroughly. Anyway, I went to the Joe Mooney Festival, which is in County Leitrim and that was the first I had seen of one of their, they call them summer schools. And in Ireland, their situation after World War II was very much like the situation in the old time music here. The traditional music had to all of a sudden compete with radio with jazz with rock-n-roll. And, there was a real lack of turning away, I think, from rural life and rural traditions. And, so their music just about died out. And, in the late [19]60's, somebody started the Willy Clancy Summer School. And over time, county after county added more summer schools. So, at this point, I wouldn't say every county in Ireland has a summer school, but I wouldn't be surprised if they did. And, what happens in all of the music, of those summer schools, and what I saw happening at the Joe Mooney School was that it was very much about connecting the most revered musicians of that county with the young people learning the music for a week. And having this really intensive experience of immersing yourself in the music. So, when I went to Joe Mooney, it was, I took my fiddle and I had to play a tune. They didn't let me choose my class. You had to audition. And they decided what level you were. I was really proud because they put me in intermediate. Thought I was doing really good. It was in this little grade school. And so there were thirty of us packed into this class. And the fellow who taught it, O'Shane, oh dear, O'Shane something, O'Sean maybe, no, not that. Well, anyway. He was eighteen years old and he was already the young hot shot fiddler of the community. And, about two-thirds of the class were age thirteen and under and were all local kids. And then the rest of us were from other countries who had come to learn this particular tradition. It was really interesting, the breakdown. And, there were local adult musicians in other classes, just not in the intermediate fiddle. Because I met many others. But, anyway, and at the end of the day, it cost 35 pounds, which was a steal, that was no more than \$50 [US] and for three hours of morning instruction. And at the end of the day, they let out class and there was a stream of cars picking up children from the school. Because it was these local kids, they were done with their school day and they were going home. And then, the pubs were full of musicians, full of jams, every pub was just hopping. And they had square dance-well, they don't call it square dancing - they had ceilidh dancing and special workshops, performances. The whole town, and this is a town of 200 people. It was just a little farming town. And, the thing was just alive with people coming in. And, the whole town was focused on this event. I went to get my laundry done and the person who took my laundry from me said, "Oh, are you here for the Joe Mooney School?" And I said, "Yes," And he said, "And what are you taking?" I said, "I'm taking intermediate fiddle." "And who's your instructor?" "Oh it's O'Shane," I couldn't [remember] his last name. "Oh, he is a lovely young fiddler, you are so fortunate, and - " [laughs]. So they were just, yeah, even the people running the laundry were all about the music that week. It was just beautiful. And, so, I saw something really special there. And what I came to understand was that was going on all over Ireland and had been for about thirty years and that was, the whole music scene of Ireland was incredibly vibrant. It was just amazing how many people were playing

traditional music and learning it. It was just beautiful. And the summer schools were how they brought, is what made that happen. That's what brought them back from the edge of extinction.

56:39 BM: So after that, after I came home, I decided to work locum tenens and ended up working back with Mary Breckenridge - Frontier Nursing Service, Mary Breckenridge Hospital. And, Appalshop got this grant to promote traditional music. It was handsomely funded. And the center piece of it was a four-week residency by Dirk Powell. And, Rich Kirby knew that I was kind of hanging loose doing the locum tenens and asked me to apply for that. And, there was, it wasn't that clean cut. It was like, they had me lined up, I think before they knew they had the grant, kind of thing. I don't know how all that came down. Anyways, it was a sixteen-month grant. So I worked half time nurse practitioner, half time arts administrator. And, my job was to make as much traditional music happen as I could to build the audience for traditional music. So, and there was a budget for that. So, I helped shore up the Carcassonne Square Dance. I had got other dance organized, not ongoing, but episodic sorts of dances other places over that sixteen months. Organized a lot of performances. Particularly Dirk Powell. Did work with the Seedtime Festival and Home Craft Days Festival and the Southeast Community College. There was a lot of partners in the thing. And, but the thing that was clear to me was that the audience for traditional music are the people who play it. It's not really a music for listening so much as it is for participation. For getting into it yourself. And so, somewhere early on in there, I was invited to an event at the Cowan Community Center. And as soon as I went in that building, I went, "Oh my gosh. Look at this dance floor. Look at this building. And oh my gosh, they've got a Save the Children program and they do day camps during the summer. And they're doing all this youth work all year round." And, I went to one of the partners was the school system and so I met Carol Ison, who was working for the Letcher County School board. And, told her about what we had available. And, started doing some performances, organizing some performances in the schools. And, then, of course, she's also the director of the community center, the Cowan Community Center. And Nell Fields, I don't know how I met Nell the first time, but somehow another, we got linked up, all three of us and decided that one of the day camps for the Save the Children program would be a music school with Dirk Powell as the resident artist. And, I proceeded to organize the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School, for its first year. And, it was awesome. We had 75 students. We had ten classes, ten teachers, ten classes. And, we had a ready-made group of students who wanted to participate because we had the kids who were regular Cowan Community Center Save the Children program kids. And during that week, Nell and Carol saw how the kids responded to the music and the singing and the square dancing. And they were just, they were converts, 100% that this needed to go on. Well, so, and this is the best part of the story, the miracle. So, in the fall after the music school, I organized an old time day for youth at the Appalshop and invited back all these kids who had come to the music school. So they could have like a day of workshops. While the kids were doing their workshops, I had a meeting with the parents upstairs. And I said, so, "I don't guess I've told you this, but I'm not really an arts administrator, I'm a nurse practitioner." And they laughed [laughs] thought that was pretty amusing, the thought of a fiddler doing their IV. And I said, "But, the problem is, I've got to go back to practice full time. The grant will be over in October, no more money, no more person to organize things. So, what do you want to do about the music school?" And they looked at me like I had three heads. And they said, "What do you mean what are we going to do about the music school? We've got to have this. We've got to do this every year, it's got to keep going." And I said, "Ok. So, to do that, then you would need somebody to coordinate it like I did this year, you'd have to have a coordinator." And Nell said, "Oh, I could do that." And I said, "Yes, I know you could, great." And I said, "But there's no money to work with this coming year." And again they looked at me like I had three heads and

said, "We'll pay for it. We've got to do this. We'll pay for it, we'll pay tuition. But you've got to do it." And it's like, "Ok, that's what we'll do." Anyway, at that magic moment, the ownership of the music school passed from Appalshop to the Cowan Community Center and it's been their baby ever since. And we just had our sixteenth year a couple weeks ago. We went from 75 students the first year to this year we had 153. We actually doubled the student size I think in the first five years. And, it was kind of overwhelming. But we've added classes as the need has arisen, we've added classes and added faculty and now we've got about twice, well not quite twice the classes. I think there's about sixteen classes. About twenty faculty. So, and people come from Cowan Creek and from Australia this year and from all over. And, I think it's had a huge impact on really doing what it was supposed to do, which is bringing eastern Kentucky's old time music back from the brink of extinction. So, it's a really vibrant, living tradition right now. And I couldn't have foreseen how, there's no way I could have foreseen how well it has worked out. I don't think that was even in my mind. I just wanted to get something started and see if it would go over. So, it went over real good. [laughs] So there you go, there's the music school story.

1:05:06 AH: Yes. Really neat story. About your trip to Ireland all the way through.

1:05:16 BM: It's such a rare thing that a grant that comes from outside the community actually funds something that becomes a permanent part of the community.

1:05:24 AH: Right, there's local ownership of it.

1:05:26 BM: Yeah, you wish it happened that way every time. But, it's pretty rare. So, that's the, to me, that's like the magic part of the story. Where people were willing to take it on and run with it.

1:05:41 AH: Well, I'm wondering if you could just talk about the role of cultural arts as a mechanism for gathering people, as a mechanism for social good.

1:05:59 BM: Oh great, Ok. One of the things that struck me from the very first moment I picked up a fiddle, and the very first time I went to festivals, how doggone nice the people are who play old time music. They're just generous and willing to share whatever they have. Musically and all kinds of other ways. And, it's not competitive at all. It's really about sharing and one of the other things I think is still amazing is that it's possible to play music with somebody for years and consider them a good friend and not know what they do for a living. Because that's not, the social status check-in you do when you first meet somebody in most other situations it's not what it's about. It's not about your social status, it's about how much you love the music and the people that play it. So, to me, the old time music community's a really healthy community. And, so it's so - in a community, in my definition means, if you're really in community, it means you honor your elders, you take care of them and you nurture your children. And, that's the work that gets done. So, for me, the music school and a lot of the off shoots of it, like the Pick and Bow program and the Carcassonne Square Dance. Well, it preexisted the music school, but there was a time there when it was, the Music School I think had a hand in helping it keep going, stay viable. Those things are all about bringing folks into a healthier community. Building just human relationships that are based not on competition, but on creativity and collaboration and it's a good set of really human values. The beautiful thing about, for the kids, I think is that there's very little music taught in the schools. This has been happening at the same time that music in the schools has been getting phased out. And the one and only extra-curricular a lot of kids get is sports. And

sports unfortunately is not for everybody. So a lot of kids get left with no extracurriculars whatsoever. And so, I think the music really fills a need to give a kid something to feel good about, something they can be proud of their own accomplishments. They can get a connection to a sane and nice instructor and learn that adults are not the enemy. They can find reasons to be proud of where they're from instead of embarrassed by. So, there's a lot of good stuff that happens for the kids. And it all has a great deal to do with that intergenerational approach, which is pretty rare anymore. Of actually getting families and all generations together to have fun together instead of - it's so rare, if you think about, anymore to do stuff together as a family that doesn't involve like passively watching something - watching a ballgame, watching a movie, watching TV. But actually doing something together. That's not that common anymore. So, it really creates some opportunities for families to have fun together. So, I think it's community building in that respect. And, then, at the very basic level. And then, at another level, there's a big overlap, I think, between this sort of do-it-yourself mentality of the young folks around here who are trying to figure out how to make work for themselves. And, that overlaps with the do-it-yourself approach to making old time music. So there's a big overlap in those folks, which I think is pretty fun. And so, if you come to the music school, you're going to see Will Bowling, who is a real pioneer in rotational grazing farming. And, David Wagoner, who runs the oldest CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] in Kentucky and his daughter Phoebe. And, on down the line. Shane Lucas was helping, he was both supplying vegetables and helping out in various ways this year. And he's somebody who's gone from mining to farming. And then there's another element, the purely economic benefit of it is that there are various and a sundry ways that money is coming into the music school, through the music school into the community. For instance, Valerie Horn has figured out how to improve, radically change the food service during the week and a lot of that food is coming from local farmers and that money is going back, instead of to the Save-A-Lot, it's going to local farmers. So they are in turn more invested in keeping the school going and it's a good economic opportunity for them. And then there's money getting spent at the hotels and various other ways. It helps shore up the community center. We pay rent, rental and various other ways that the community center benefits. So, it's all kind of a real fabric I think that's interwoven in a lot of different directions. [laughs] Does that kind of answer that one sort of? In a roundabout way. Ok. [laughs].

1:13:19 AH: Yeah. Well, I'm wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to add?

1:13:29 BM: You covered it all.

1:13:30 AH: Any hopes or concluding thoughts that you'd like to share?

1:13:33 BM: Hopes. My hope is that we will keep going the direction we're going as far as the music, bringing more local kids especially into the music community. And, providing opportunities for young people to actually get a little money in their pocket for gigs and playing dances. We've now got this amazing phenomenon of I guess people I would consider in the first generation of the music school, Jessie Wells and Brett Ratliff and trying to think, and Carla Gover, who are making their living essentially by playing music. They're making their living in the arts and it's really gratifying to see that that's even possible. So, I hope we'll keep going in that direction. I don't want it to turn into a competitive thing, like bluegrass is competitive where only one band's going to get the gig and you fight over it. I hope we don't get to that. But, I do think it's really exciting that young people can look around them and say, "Hmm, I don't really want to work at Wal-mart. I think I'm going to try my hand at the arts and see if I can make it that way.

That's pretty amazing. So, I see that as a real leap forward. And those are young people who are then deeply invested in staying in the community and helping us through this difficult economic transition. So, you've got to have the folks who are all in to be able to make that work. You've got to have young people who are really committed. So, hope we keep going that direction. I guess that's it [laughs].

1:15:48 AH: Ok. Thank you so much for all your stories and time.

1:15:53 BM: You're welcome, you're welcome. So that's fun.

1:15:56 [End of Interview]