

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #47 - Side A

Subject: Agnes Foley Kennedy - On Sagebrush Orchestra

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: November 17, 1975

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

AGNES FOLEY KENNEDY: This is Agnes Foley Kennedy speaking, a sequel to my first tape made under the guidance of Pauline Braymen. Today is November 17th, 1975

My goal is to identify every child from Burns or Harney County who had the good fortune to study violin with Mary V. Dodge. ... Lampman's article from the Oregonian read on my first tape lists the full roster of orchestra members, parents and chaperons who were on the Portland/Salem tour in September 1916. He does not list the musicians separately, but you will find them in a program that I am depositing in the archives at the Burns Library. This is the roster, which Mr. Lampman provided.

The roster of the Sagebrush Orchestra reads: Mrs. M. V. Dodge, Glen Dodge, Louise Des Ilets, Kathleen Jordan, Claire Swaine, Gladys Byrd, Mrs. William Farre, Katherine Farre, Alex Eggleston, Mrs. Jacob Welcome, Margaret Welcome, Mrs. W. Drink-water, Jessie Drinkwater, Mrs. D. Gibbs, Catherine Gibbs, Mrs. Jim Branden, Mrs. John Loggan, Frank Loggan, Lee Caldwell, John Garrett, Ruby Temple, Mrs. Charles King, Frances King, Mrs. Emmett Reed, Baxter Reed, Mrs. E. E. Owsley, Hazel Owsley, Ruby Owsley, Otha McKinnon, Mrs. Homer Reed, Roselle Reed, Viola Richardson, Mrs. C. B. McConnell, Mrs. G. W. Clevenger, Geary Clevenger, Mrs. Roy Mullin, Gwendolyn

Lampshire, Mrs. Perry Thornburg, Hilda Thornburg, Hazel Young, Joe Young, Maurice Smith, Marie Smith, Nellie Barron, Mrs. Ray Barron, Warren Teller, Mrs. Ada Teller, Mrs. Island, Bernice Island, Mrs. Haney, Terance Haney, Mrs. Ray Smith, Miriam McConnell, Mrs. Ben Campbell, Signor Glaudo Merrigiolli, and Mr. G. Hull.

In my first tape I had neglected mentioning how hampers of sagebrush were carried to Portland and strewn about the city as a symbol of the Sagebrush Orchestra. Sagebrush festooned all the lamp posts around the Imperial Hotel, which was home and head-quarters due to the generosity of Phil Metschan, owner. After three concerts, heaping baskets of sagebrush were in the lobbies and banked beneath the footlights. It must have been a very aromatic audience. And in leaving the concerts each lady was presented with a little laurel branch, so to speak, of sage, and each gentleman was given a boutonniere for his lapel. A delightful and amusing memory.

I wish now to record the names of three violin students of Mary V. Dodge, who were child prodigies. It was never Mary Dodge's ambition to perfect solo virtuoso for concert careers. She wished to inspire her children to know the basic techniques and the standard repertoire of classical music so they could listen to great performances with taste and discernment, wherever their lives led them.

Secondly, they came to know the pleasure of ensemble playing both musically and socially. Wherever I lived I usually was a member of an amateur string quartet, just for the pleasure and the companionship. I well recall how many blue notes I personally have played in Haydn quartets.

Her first highly gifted student in Portland was Geraldine Peterson. Geraldine Peterson was the first young music student to carry Portland's name abroad. She studied with Mary Dodge for ten years, and was the third concertmaster of the Portland Junior Symphony, 1933 to 1935.

The American Youth Orchestra was organized by Maestro Leopold Stokowski in 1940 after his resignation from the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. Personal auditions were conducted in every state for the orchestra to get full instrumentation for a 100-piece youth orchestra. Geraldine Peterson was selected in private audition by Leopold Stokowski as a member of the violin section from Portland. At that point they needed just one more violin. After a period of intensive rehearsals the orchestra was taken on a tour of South American cities, which became a triumphal procession. When they returned to the United States full of honors the premier concert was given in Carnegie Hall on May 16th, 1941. My husband was then a dean of university connected with Rutgers in the state of New Jersey, and we often attended concerts in New York. So we were very interested in the announcement of this particular program. First of all, because my husband had spent his student years under the baton of Maestro Stokowski studying symphonic literature in the old academy of music in Philadelphia. And of course, because of my membership in a youth orchestra in Oregon, I naturally wished to hear the performance of prodigiously talented young people, under the baton of this peer-less maestro.

Since there was only one Oregonian on the roster, it was imperative that I should go backstage to congratulate Geraldine. So my husband and I immediately went back stage at the end of the concert. We found everything in turmoil. Their chaperon was hastening them, put their instruments away, to get back to their hotel with promptitude for they had a concert the next evening in Boston, Massachusetts. So my compliments were rather pro forma but very warm indeed, and her apparent happiness and surprise of meeting a fellow Oregonian was very endearing to me. I had turned to leave and then casually looked back and said, "Geraldine, who was your teacher in Portland?" She replied, "Mary V. Dodge, for ten years." Immediately we were peers, for this meeting

spanned 31 years. I had been Mary V. Dodge's first violin student in 1910 and played first chair in the Harney County Children's Orchestra in 1912.

Leopold Stokowski's plans for the American Youth Orchestra encompassed a transcontinental tour of the United States, concerts throughout Canada and Mexico. But the tragic even of December 7, 1941, our entrance into World War II blighted many such beautiful endeavors of life enlargement. However, I treasure Mary V. Dodge's reply to my letter of praise for her gifted pupil, Geraldine. She made a very typical remark: "I had a good crop that year. Any three of my senior violin students could have passed the audition." She never played favorites. My reminiscences of Mary Dodge and how her training have transmuted my own life and tastes will always remain with me.

Her second prodigy was Jacqueline Duke. Jacqueline was an extraordinary child and fulfilled her promise under Mary Dodge's tutelage and training, and is now a professional player in a major orchestra in the United States. Gwendolyn Lampshire Hayden gave me a concert program of Jacqueline's in which she played the Mendlesons violin concerto, two Mozart sonatas and Chrysler's Caprice Venua. She was then ten years of age.

I mentioned on my first tape that three Dodge pupils are first violins, a first violinist and two violas are now professional members of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra under the directorship of Laurence Smith who is a hometown boy. Jacqueline Duke Anderson is a professional member of the Atlantic Georgia Symphony Orchestra, a principal violinist. That symphony is conducted by the celebrated Robert Shaw.

There is a third gentleman who it has been my pleasure to meet since retiring to Portland. He is a gifted and loyal individual who trained under Mary V. Dodge while he was still a young boy and who is still a member of the Portland Junior Symphony organization. He played in both of her Portland orchestras; the Irvington School orchestra

and was an original member of the Portland Junior Symphony. His name is James Eoff, and he is presently assistant director of the orchestra with maestro Yako Ashamalo as director/ conductor. Mr. Eoff has the assignment of teacher and rehearsal director of the preparatory orchestra. The members are being readied to take the places of the performers in the senior orchestra as they graduate. The young musicians must leave the orchestra when they are 18 years of age.

At the concert in March 1975, Mr. Eoff received a 50 year award and citation presented by the Secretary of State, Mr. Clay Meyers, who is a board member of the symphony and a long time loyal supporter of the juniors.

In conclusion I should like to read some excerpts from a story written about the Harney County children's orchestra by a reporter, Lucia B. Harriman for the "Delineator" magazine. She came to Burns personally after the Sagebrush Orchestra had received national attention through the pages of the "Musician" and the "Etude", both published in the east.

This is taken from a "Delineator", September 1917: On the page just opposite, there is a description of the darlings, what would now be called the "cafe society", the dancing castle, Irene and Vernon, a picture of them doing the dance which they originated, the castle walk. So for anyone of my era who may hear this tape, this will give you the period in which the article was written.

Ask any youthful resident of a small town how he likes life in his town. His answer will usually be, he dislikes living there because nothing ever happens. East or Middle West, Pacific coast, north or south, wherever you are in our great country, the rest-less, the discontent found in small towns and villages will be epitomized in that one complaint. Youth demands that something happens. The dull monotony of days, which middle life and age, accepts without complaint stifles youth, which cries out unceasingly for

stimulation. Generally unconscious of their real basic need, which is an opportunity for cultural growth, they usually take out their discontent in just dull acceptance of the inevitable, finally revolt, and go to the "big city". Contrast the opportunities laid at the feet of the child of a congested city neighborhood where the neighborhood theater gives them both the chance to see and perform in the best of classic and modern plays, where concerts of exceptional excellence are often given free; tickets for fine symphony programs can be purchased at a minimal cost for children; where they love to dance, where the potter's wheel, the loom, the paintbrush all offer outlet, the gifts, and the imagination of a seeker of self expression. Contrast this with the average small town's resources.

So this is why I happened to go to Burns, Oregon to meet Mrs. M. V. Dodge of Boston who had come out fresh from her own musical circle, which contained the great New England Conservatory, and here she had formed an orchestra of children which has become known nationally through the pages of the "Musician" magazine and the "Etude". The "Etude" article was illustrated with an enormous violin in the midst of a desert landscape. Covered with children beautifully gowned, which showed the temper and quality of the people living in this small town.

Burns is a town of 1500 individuals, the largest town in a radius of 150 miles. It is located in Harney County, the vast undeveloped section of the State of Oregon, which covers a region as great as the combined territory of Delaware, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Patiently in the past 25 years there have been squatters, cow and sheepmen; before that the true pioneer came into develop the country as they said, in the early 1880's. Latterly has followed the dry farmers, with the Sagebrush Act. They are seeking the development of that infertile soil through vast irrigation projects, waiting for the railroads to come at last and put them in touch with the outside world.

Over the country the homesteaders cabins are found tucked away amidst the sagebrush, a gray green sea, each one toiling to dig a well or to put up a fence of barbed wire to keep out the straying horses and cattle; or particularly the jackrabbits, which are numerous. The one voice you hear at night is the voice of the gray coyote calling from the nearby hills. I doubt if you would have picked upon the county seat of Harney County, for Burns cut off from roads far removed from even the ordinary contact with life outside, offered little that was encouraging beyond that indomitable spirit of push that abounds among the pioneers of this section of the West. That pride of locality, that abiding faith in its future which is shared even by the toddling babes, it was mere chance, or perhaps shall we say fate that brought Mrs. Dodge to Harney County, but it was her own inherent love for music, and for children that was behind the movement now known far and wide as the Children's Sagebrush Orchestra of Harney County.

Seven years ago Mrs. Dodge came to Burns from her eastern home, that center of cultured learning, bringing with her beloved violin and a broad knowledge of music. She also plays the piano with the touch of an artist. She found almost no music in Burns, a self-centered individual probably would have declared the situation impossible and taken the first stage out, except that she was a bride, her husband was an engineer and he was engaged in one of these great irrigation projects.

She found out that the town was the center of the educational opportunities for the entire county. That into it from their distant ranches came dozens of families that their children might have the advantage of the town's schools during the winter. She conceived the idea of interesting those children; most of them shy as the jackrabbits that sought shelter in the sagebrush, to interest them in the music of the masters.

Many of them had never heard a musical instrument played by a proficient musician. Undaunted she went to work. Benefit concerts raised funds for instruments,

and ex-photograph gallery was converted into a studio. Every child with a musical ear or aspiration was enlisted and tried out. None failed to pass her test, she was so eager to bring together an ensemble, which might one day be an orchestra.

Then after months of patient toil there blossomed forth a small budding symphony orchestra. Possibly no one who has not been a parent can begin to realize the thrill of pride that stirred that first audience in 1912 in old Tonawama Hall as it listened to real music drawn by bows in the fingers of mere babes who only a few months before had not known a musical note nor had a musical ambition.

After six years the Children's Sagebrush Orchestra had thoroughly proved itself. It is no longer an experiment, but an integral part of the cultural life of Harney County. It has brought joy and ambition to replace the monotony of which I spoke. Its personnel now includes 35 children ranging in age from 5 to 15. Its string section numbers 24 instruments. Children no older than five are playing the second violin with accuracy and assurance. Two years ago the children made their first venture into the out-side world. They traveled by stage and train, to most of them their first experience on the railroad, to Portland and Salem, the state capitol. Dressed in uniforms of olive drab khaki, because though we had not yet entered the war, the European war had long since begun. The khaki was chosen not only because the wartime feeling was beginning to reach us, but because it was the nearest approach to their native sagebrush. With a touch of gay crimson in their ties and hatbands, they were a marked group in Portland and wherever they went, they drew forth comment.

Last summer they appeared before Chautauqua's in Eastern Oregon. Mrs. Dodge said to me, this was a great preparation for our tour to Portland. The past winter they had each week presented a new program of classical music at the local moving picture theater to keep them climbing in the words of their leader.

To see these earnest young musicians absorbed at getting the most, and giving their best, has been an inspiration to the entire community. When a slip of a 13 year old girl, one of the star performers of the orchestra, with ease and seasoned poise tosses off Brahms' Hungarian Dance or selections from Schubert or Dvorak, the entire town heaves a sigh of content, and glows with pardonable pride. And when youthful rivals of Elman and Heifetz draw their bows across the strings there is often a tightening of the throat and a moisture about the eyes of certain fathers and mothers who, "Never knew they had that in him".

And now, in conclusion, I should like to bring this series of reminiscences up to date; and on a later occasion perhaps there will be further material come forth from Burns attics to continue this most extraordinary story of life on the frontier in Harney County from 1900 to 1930.

One of my most surprising and delightful conversations in Washington, D. C. took place the year we were preparing to retire to Portland, 1970. I had been a charter member of the volunteer Smithsonian Associates, a group which was engaged in preparing children's programs, field trips, and tours for adult members to the famous art collections in adjoining eastern cities. We were invited to the premiere opening of the National Fine Arts Collection and Portrait Gallery now housed in the handsome old Pension Building. The director was Dr. Joshua B. Taylor who had been professor and dean of the school of fine arts at the University of Chicago for many years. In complimenting him that evening on the sumptuous gallery, I remarked that we hoped he might some day visit Portland and my husband. Together we would introduce him to our unique collection of American Indian Art. Since the Smithsonian takes such great pride in its George Catlin collection of Indian paintings. His reply was, "I was born in Hillsboro, Oregon. During my elementary high school days I came to Portland to study violin with

Mary V. Dodge, and she counseled me to make the fine arts my field. So my bachelor degree from Reed College was in fine arts and the humanities, and my PhD dissertation was written on the subject of art history."

So this series of reminiscences has come full circle from the Sagebrush Orchestra in Burns, Harney County, to the historic Smithsonian Institution in our nation's capital.

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