



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Accession Numbers:

MH-00-09-FN

MH-00-09-D MH-00-09-C MH-00-09-CS

Fieldnotes

Audio recordings

Photographic documentation

Additional materials

Date(s): May 12, 2000

Related Accession Numbers: cassette tape made by Scott Alarik for Boston Globe article

Individual/Group/Event: Burgess Steeplejack Company - Chris Burgess

Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg, Scott Alarik

Location of Interview: First Parish Universalist Unitarian Church in Milton; Sal's restaurant

Street Address: Canton Street

City: Milton

Zip: _____

Co: Norfolk County

Contact person (if different from above): Chris Burgess

Title: owner of Burgess Steeplejack Company

Sponsoring organization (for event or group): _____

Address (if different from above): [REDACTED]

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED]

Evening: [REDACTED]

E-mail: _____

Website: _____

Special Needs (including translation): _____

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): steeple restoration, swing stage, steeplejack trade

Traditions noted for follow-up: _____

Other Possible Contacts: George Burgess (Chris' father) in Hingham and his scrapbook.

Summary Description: Heard about Chris Burgess from Penny Myles who had seen him working on a steeple in Hingham. She brought in a local newspaper clipping -- when Scott Alarik requested leads for the story he was writing, I suggested Chris for the South Weekly. Both Chris and his father George are

"shy on publicity." Mainly because the newspapers "get it wrong" and they sensationalize the steeplejack's work. It was difficult reaching Chris during April. Turns out April was a very wet month, so Chris wasn't able to work much. We arranged to meet on May 18 -- even though the weather looked threatening, Scott and I made the trip to Milton, found the First Parish and the steeplejack's equipment. By 1:20 we saw no sign of the crew. It had just started to drizzle. I reached Chris on the phone in Pembroke -- it was already coming down hard there with a little bit of lightening. Obviously they were not showing up for work.. The last place a steeplejack wants to be when it's lightening is on a steeple. Weather permitting, we planned to meet in two days.

Friday, May 20th, Scott Alarik and I showed up in Milton again to talk to Chris Burgess. Two crew members were also on site -- Bill Lortie who has worked with Chris for 20 years and a new employee, Larry Crowley. David Ryan, photographer for the Globe, showed up and we went up into the bell tower for photos. Once inside the bell tower, we all climbed up on the roof -- just under the bell cradle. The view was expansive - one could see downtown Boston. Chris encouraged me to step over the wooden railing so I could photograph the lower level, where Bill and Scott were repairing clapboards. We were about 100 feet up in the air. I was fine until Chris showed me how rotten the vertical supports of the railing were -- by removing one with very little effort.

David Ryan finished taking his digital photographs and we climbed back down. Scott finished asking Chris some questions and then they both off around 11:00. I asked if I could stay until they took their lunch break, so I could tape record an interview. Only if they could take me to lunch, Bill replied. This was after Chris had wondered, "What are you going to hang around us all day?"

Bill Lortie brings over some old carpentry books and a scrapbook for me to look at. Flipping through the scrapbook I stop at one arresting photo. There is Bill doing a handstand on the apex of a roof being built.

Below is a transcription from Scott Alarik's recording:

Usually people get into the steeplejack business through family connections

We see some fantastic things that the oldtimers did -

BL: Basically, they were pretty sharp customers back then, to build these things. I mean when you think of the modern tools and the equipment we have today, they did everything by hand. Chisels, planes, hand saws. They had quite the talent back then.

Like how did they get them up there before?

CB: Build em right in place. We've built them right in place.

MH: So you're hauling all the --

The weather vane - I've got to take it down and gold leaf it. . . [talking about his children] One is 11 and one is 4. My four-year old daughter will probably be the one that takes this over. She's fearless of anything. Abigail. And my son Miles -- he's too smart for this stuff. Anybody with a brain in their head wouldn't get into it.

MH: That's what they say about roofers.

CB: Yeah, we got to fix the slate on the roof. Jack the bell up and fix the bell cradle.

MH: Who works on the bell? You do that too?

CB: Oh yeah. We did five bells already this year, five brand new bell cradles. Made out of pressure treated.

MH: No, I'm talking about the actual bell.

CB: Oh no, no no. Those were made in the 1700s, 1800s.

Chris has a brother in Newburyport, George Burgess and John Burgess in Wells Maine are both steeplejacks. Chris estimates there are about a dozen steeplejacks working in Massachusetts. Chris does 12-15 steeples a year.

CB: This one here, we'll probably be here two months on this one and that backs us up. The month of April we lost because of rain. It rained 26 days out of 30s.

They break for lunch around noon. I pile into Bill Lortie's pick-up with them and drive to Sal's Diner. We get in line, order and go sit down at a booth. I get out the HHB and we wait for the food to arrive. After everyone has eaten a bit, I interview them for just under 20 minutes. Then it's back to work. Chris admits that it's the longest they've spoken to anyone about their work -- the papers usually get it all wrong and sensationalize their work. On the drive back we talk about apprenticeships a bit and the steeplejack business in general. We wonder about 50 years from now. Who will be left doing this kind of work. Chris explains that a regular contractor can be brought in as long as the client pays for the pipe scaffolding, which can cost \$30,000 to \$40,000. Churches apply for National Trust for Historic Preservation to help pay the cost of historically accurate steeple repair.