



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg and Scott Alarik

Interviewee(s): Chris Burgess, Bill Lortie, Larry Crowley

Event: repair of First Parish Universalist Unitarian Church in Milton

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Brief summary of tape contents: Chris Burgess and his two employees - Bill Lortie and Scott Crowley - talk about what they encounter in repairing church steeples built over 200 years ago.

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| 003 | Maggie: It's Friday, May 12th, and I'm at the First Parish Church in Milton observing the Burgess Steeplejack Company working on a steeple, making repairs. This is Chris Burgess' company, and there are three men working, and they are replacing the clapboard on the east side of the clocktower. When they take a lunch break we'll do an interview with them. |
| 010 | [At 12:30 we all pile in Bill's pick-up truck and drive to Sal's Diner for lunch.. Bill's treat. Maggie: Why don't you give me your names and I'll start asking you questions. Chris Burgess, Larry Crowley, Bill Lortie. M: We were at the church this morning in Milton and it's an older church. Can you tell me, you were talking about what you see when you go into these older steeples in terms of how they are built that differs from how something might be built today? CB: Well back then everything was mortise and tenon post and beam, timber framing and basically all the materials used were native to this area. This particular steeple is oak and pine, all the timbers are, pine sheathing and everything else. But today they build them out of steel and things like that, you know. Steel frame 'em. |

M: So that, the wood, why are you doing the work you are doing today, for someone who wouldn't know, I mean what's wrong with it?

What's happened is that over the years, they no longer can just be painted. The clapboards that we've taken off of the clockdecks have seen their days. They can't be railed anymore because they are so old and brittle and tired. There's so many nails in them now, and its time to do them again.

M: And there's rot too isn't there?

And there's a lot of rot up there on the railings, on the clock dials, there's rotted clock faces, clock dials. So you gotta get rid of it.

028 M: And Bill, you were talking about when you're up in these old steeples, the uniqueness of the work? And you [Chris] also mentioned something about that too, about the skills they had, they didn't have all the modern tools we have today. What do you see when you're up there that impresses you?

BL: Everything actually, having viewed a lot of steeples and different types of constructions used. It was a building trade that was passed on father to son, where with their own ideas, their own expression in their woodwork. You see it not only in their framing techniques, but even in what we see as final finish items, which made every church unique and different. You don't find two churches that are the same and you didn't find two builders that thought the same. We're impressed because some of the stuff they did without the technology that we have, they had overbuilt, understood wind stresses, you know, every dimensional problem as far as stress failures and worked it into their thinking of how they designed and supported and braced things. This particular steeple that we're working on, it's a combination of white pine and white oak and red oak, the framing stock. The boards, they were very resourceful with, it's all white pine boards that they utilized the full board. When they cut the board, rather than make them all parallel, some of them you notice they tapered because they didn't want to waste the wood and then they put the taper the other direction. Even the sheathing that was put on, they beveled the edges, so each board as it goes on, overlaps. Just like you might put your siding on, in case there was any leaks down the road.

046 M: Explain what sheathing is.

Sheathing is the boards that you put on immediately over the framing stock. And what they've done rather than just put square edges on, they tapered the edges so it acts as a watershed. So if in fact there was any problem, you know, the leaking behind the existing siding in this case the clapboards, they had a double protection system. The way they set up the cornerboards, they had put battons in-between the clapboards and the corner cornerboards, and again, another backup system. For every system there was a backup system, so their resourcefulness, their thought-process. I know I'm continually impressed and continue to learn a lot.

My oldest boy is 24 now. He's been working at this job - he just had his tonsils out. He's an engineer and you know a lot of times, we run our engineering programs. If we're going to be introducing new beams into a steeple, what we have to do now to be up to code is make sure it meets modern building

requirements, you know, and of course with his engineering background, we can run things through the computer. Some of the stuff that was doublechecked on of existing things probably exceeded building codes by eight, ten, even twenty times.

061 M: Were they overbuilding?

Oh they overbuilt for sure, yeah. They had the benefit, of our virgin forests and took advantage of it, yeah.

M: And where do you get your wood today?

Most of the stuff we use is either Douglas Fir from the west coast for framing stock. In situations where there is going to be any exposure even to dampness, not direct drain, we will go to the pressure treated stock, which is the southern yellow pine from down in Georgia, in that area. A lot of our trim, we're not satisfied with what white pine used to be able to do because we don't have the virgin trees anymore. So we've had to be more resourceful. We've gone to mahoganies, cedars and redwood.

110 Expensive, but you know as you can see everything we are doing up there, getting up there is a huge part of the job, so Chris has made a point that if there is a better way, if there's a better material, that's what we're going to use. We kind of follow through with that.

073 M: Yep. It seems like what you just said about getting up there is a major part of the job. You're doing that with what, ladders, rope?

114 CB: It's called a 'swing-stage' that's up there now. Block and tackles.

M: And, I asked you earlier about the knots. Are they similar to what's used in maritime work?

Absolutely, oh yeah. Everything is similar to each other.

M: Because we talked about the comparison of working on a boat. How is it similar?

119 Oh, just because she's getting hit by all four sides, all four seasons, and you gotta keep 'em tight. If you don't keep 'em tight, they'll start rotting from the inside-out. It's main structure can start rotting out on them.

082 M: What's it like working way up high like that?

It's a pleasure (SC laughs). Nobody bothers you.

M: (laughing) Except people like me.

SC: Nobody bothers you, the view is unbelievable.

M: And you both mentioned you have children, how would you feel about them following in this trade?

BL: My son's been doing this with me since he was seven years old. I've got pictures in that book you were looking at, seven years old on one of those water tanks. First time I brought him in a Bosun's chair (?) he was three years old.

CB: Mine was two.

M: Yeah? What's a Bosun's chair?

BL: It's a chair, it's a wooden board basically, with a rope harness around it that we put the top lock from our falls into. Right now we have our falls going to the bed ladder. Usually working up there, we're either on swingstage, bosun's chair, which is a single person lift, or we'll go to a cable or catenary staging, you know, it's called the chimney rig.

093 M: Chimney rig. And that's what your father does?

CB: Uh, smokestacks yes.

M: Smokestacks. And now, did you have a choice about going into this trade? Like did you want to do it?

Did I want to do it? If I knew now what I knew then. [he gets this backwards] .(laughter). No, it's -- I mean we were brought up with it ever since we were kids, so.

M: Right, how many generations does it go back in your family?

We're the third, myself and my brothers.

M: So it's you, your father --

His father.

M: His father ..came from where?

England.

M: Did he work on, who worked on the John Hancock?

He did. (pause) That was his last job.

M: He lost his life? What happened?

Uhhh -- he fell down, he fell down

BL: -- through some type of a shaft up there or something. Something, something broke.

102 M: Is there any pride associated with carrying that on in your family?

143 CB: I'm sure there is, you know I mean, to us, it's just a job, it's what we do. You know, I mean we don't make any sensationalism out of it or anything else. I mean it's..I'll be honest with ya. This is the most we've spent with somebody in a long time talking about it, because usually it turns into a complete disaster and we say, 'We're not talking to anybody anymore.'

M: Really what do they get wrong?

They just sensationalize it too much. And a lot of it sounds corny.

BL: One thing that happens with the news people is that they want to write it the way they think it should be, the way it looks best. And I think at first you kind of like the press, they want to talk to you and everything, and then, it's not that they intentionally distort it. It's that they don't understand enough of the questions they ask you, and they don't get it right. I mean, this was just a simple wound on me. I had done a steeple, I was over in Needham. And we rebuilt everything on it, you know, we rebuilt the urns, rebuilt.

CB: Dedham.

BL: Dedham yeah. Done all this carpentry, and we had replicated everything, put it all back. And the paper came in, it was The Ledger. And they knew the next day we were going to be painting it out. And you start at the top and you're painting it out. So they came in and they took these photographs. And I was right on the front page of The Ledger: "Painter, caulker, Bill Lortie." (laughs)

CB: That's all he did.

SC: [groans] Ooaaaah, low blow.

BL: And after that, I've been 'Sigmund Hurland, Frank Fleet, Dave Edwards.' I won't even tell them who I am.

CB: Its' like when you came today, he says, 'What stage names are we using?'

M: I get it, I get it. But that's the newspaper business!

BL: Well, that's what we're talking about. You're coming from a better place.

M: the whole point of what a folklorist is trying to do is to get a sense of the insider knowledge. So that's the only way you understand, it's like in college. You're trying to understand this world of work.

There you go. Yeah, I was going to be Angus McCloud today. (laughter)

129 M: It sounds like there's a little bit of pride among steeplejacks. I mean, if you're a carpenter, and you say you started out, right? There is a little bit of -- and I don't mean this as a pun -- but an elevated status to do this work, don't you think?

BL: Literally.

CB: This isn't for everybody.

172 M: It's not. So what does it take besides the obvious of not having a fear of heights? What else does it..?

CB: Comfortable with where you are. If you're not comfortable where you are you don't belong there.

M: Just like an actor on the stage, you got to be.

Larry came to work with me last October..Last October or September?

October?

October? Hewanted to try it.I haven't been able to shake him since.

M: Really?

He loves it. [Scott is smiling.]

M: What do you love about it?

BL: Working with me?

SC: Working with Bill. It's a lot of the carpentry. I've been building houses for twenty-something years, and it's everything's basically the same. And this here is a totally different type of carpentry.

M: It's like everything's there but in a much smaller space, right?

Enh . . . tighter confinements, but I don't know. I enjoy putting the old things back together. Plus the views are unbelievable. I love the views.

M: It is.

146 M: So that's what you love about the job. What is it that you really don't like, what's your least favorite thing about this work?

CB: Climbing up 'em in the morning. [laughter]

BL: Toughest thing up there is --

CB: -- dealing with the weather.

M: Really? Moreso than the paperwork?

Oh yeah. When you gotta start fighting the weather to get a day's worth of work in and you're fighting the weather all day long, it's no fun. The other thing I don't like about it, is when you walk into a project that needs a lot more than originally was thought of, and they won't let you fix it the way it should be fixed.Because of financial --

M: Well, this one sounds like it needs more than --

Oh this one needs a lot of work and they didn't realize just how bad it was, because nobody goes up there.

M: Nobody goes up there, right. Then what do you do, you have to try to talk them into doing it right.

Then you bring them up there, you show it to them, you take photographs, you price everything out. I mean, there's a..

BL: Sometimes if it's bad enough, we cut it down and put it right in the ground so they can see what the problem is. Yeah, I think the biggest hassle for me, and of course we have to surrender to modern techniques, you know, it's a combination of proving old techniques and modern things we incorporate you know, we do use a lot of steel and epoxies and stuff like that. Working up there, winds always going to be a problem, not just because it's blowing on you. It's when you're stripping things, it's all in your eyes, your mouth, when you're working with epoxies, you're in your chairs, you know, it's not like everything is going to be organized and you got a bench in front of you. There's some environmental problems, you know, like you can't avoid when you're dealing with it. A lot of this stuff that's been in the steeples has been up there for 150 years. And you're talking about pidgeon shit, dust and dirt, and just a combination of a lot of things. You start to pull it apart, and you're just going to wear it, you don't have any choice.

167 M: Wouldn't the paint have lead in it?

Absolutely.

M: So you're exposed to a lot of -- it sounds awful.

CB: Don't print that.

BL: Print it!

M: They need to know.

BL: They do need to know. I think what I like is, when you're building a house, building a factory, you're looking at loads -- live loads, dead loads, loads that are going to work with the forces of gravity. When you're building a tower on something, weight isn't the issue. It's windshear. In other words, the download pressure happens when the wind blows this way, it forces the numbers on this side down, you know? So you're working with windshear, other elements that wouldn't even be a serious consideration in a house or a lower building or something like that. So you have to put your thinking cap on, like when you're sizing out timbers, how deep into the bowels of the church they have to go so it's down deep enough to be able to handle it. So there's other thought processes, and it's fun to work things out like that. We like doing the mathematics and playing games like that.

185 M: And, the ladders -- and I'll let you go soon since I know you got to get back to work -- can you describe, you were up on the balcony part, I don't know the term for these things, what's the..go up from there.

CB: You've got a louver deck, then you have the spire, which is the tall pointed thing.

M: OK. So there was a shingled spire, and then there's the thing on top of that, that holds the weather vane?

Right.

M: OK. So you're going to actually have to go, you have a ladder up to that point where it changes from wood to metal? And then what are you going to have to do, just describe that about carrying.

You gotta bring up another ladder, lash it to the steeple to go up past the top of the weather vane.

M: So you lash to the steeple but the base of it sits on your previous ladder?

No.

M: So what does it, I don't get how it stays up there.

If I've got a spire, you got to put a line around it, fetch it up tight, how's the line going to drop up because the steeple flares? So I can launch it up there any way we want it. You know what I'm saying?

M: Oh, I see. I see. And then you had to carry this heavy --

Lower it down to the ground.

M: And the you goldplate it?

Goldleaf it.

M: Goldleaf it, I'm sorry. Put it back up. And goldleaf, is that real --?

Real gold.

M: Yeah, and it's very flighty, right?

Very thin.

So you have to do that when you're out of the wind, yeah.

Yeah.

203 M: Do you know other steeplejacks?

Oh yeah.

M: Do you have comradery with them?

No, no, no. Do I know you? [laughter]

CB: You don't want to get two or three steeplejack companies in the same barroom.

M: Why, what happens?

It'd be ugly.

M: Why? (laughing)

We're not the friendliest bunch -- to each other. There's one company who I deal frequently with.

M: Is it because of competition or --

That, and there's a lot to it. It's not like plumbers and carpenters and electricians who go out and party together.

M: No I wonder, and it's not, it's not. Why?

It's just the way we are.

M: OK.

Just the way we are.

212 M: Well can I buy you all coffee? To take back?

No no, we're all set.

M: No? OK. Thank you for letting me impose on your workday.

BL: That's OK.

CB: Your welcome.