



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg

Interviewee(s): John F. "Jack" Sullivan and Paul Butt

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Brief summary of tape contents: Tough times back in the 1980s compared to flush times during the Big Dig, welding as specialty, creosote piles in the summertime, lung cancer, tunnel work with sledge hammers and ratchet bits, working in caissons, the bends, Newfoundland fishing, the ice, drinking, tying off Old Rupert, operators and drinking, My Brothers Place and other watering holes that construction workers frequented, the Sandhog's union hall, Dudley Square Irish dances, Johnny Powell's orchestra, Joe Derrane.

Counter/ABS	Contents
	<p>JS: . . . They never retrieved the money put into it. I remember working with Louis up at Harvard Square. He became a union carpenter after World War II. And here it is 1980 and he's struggling to get vested. And he's 60 years of age. Times were tough. They put in so many years and then they have a break in service, cause they went out non-union or worked by themselves. Then come back in again and then back out again.</p> <p>MH: In Harvard Square, was that the T they were putting in? JS: Yeah, the T. I was pile driving then but at the time there weren't that many pile drivers on the job. I was basically doing the welding and burning for the carpenters. Back then that was a fight; today they're all one. Different locals fought over their jurisdiction. You can't blame them.</p> <p>PB: Back in that time, there was a lot of work of T work going on too. I was down at Davis Square, Porter Square. JS: If it wasn't for that work then, there wasn't much work around. PB: No, those were tough times. I remember back at the Charlestown Dam. If you weren't working there, you weren't working, basically. JS: At one time, at the union hall, there were only three or four gangs in the whole local working.</p>

PB: I was glad to be working. During the Big Dig, I remember all the young guys working with me, I says, "You better do something with the money now, because if you think it's going to be this way this way all the time -- " Since they've found out that was true. It wasn't always going to be that way.

MH: It must be hard for them to imagine if they came into it in this full swing.

PB: That's right.

JS: I think those young guys were lucky in that respect. If they came in the very beginning of the boom, they could get 20 years in before this stuff tightened up. They never saw tough times.

PB: Just like back then, there were certain people that were better than others. You were much more in demand than other people.

MH: Can you describe what makes somebody a really good pile driver?

PB: I don't know. Basically the willingness to do the work. Just do it instead of arguing about it. When I first come in, welders wanted extra money than the monkeys were getting. Well, actually, they had a point, cause I did both. You could be welding for weeks on end. As soon as the welding stopped you were in the [?] Say they were doing an indiv[?] H pile. They don't do much of this stuff anymore. You might be really trying to get this thing done cause the whole gang is standing around waiting for this thing to get welded for hours. And they get a break. Oh yeah, there were certain ones that always thought they should get more.

MH: So not everybody has to know how to weld?

JS: They do today. Not at that time.

PB: Back then, some of the welders didn't want to do anything but welding. And in that case, they were ones that didn't work when there wasn't welding. Because they didn't want to do anything other than weld. You had to be capable of doing anything. Certain guys that weren't good around wood -

JS: I can remember the first guy I brought into the Local, cause I was putting in lagging. I came in in '67, so another few months, that I was on the night shift. So they told me, "Call the hall, talk to Red," two nights in a row to get another guy. No one wanted to come down. So one of the laborers, Barry Babbins - I don't know if you remember him. He died, got killed since. But he wanted to go pile driving. So I told him, I says, "Fine with me. Call the hall." Red says fine. Put him on. I said, "There's only a couple of days and then we got to find another job." So, we finished up the night shift. I went back in the gang days. And I told Barry, - he was Cape Verdean, a black guy, a hell of a good worker. I gave him an axe and he went ahead creosoting piles from Mckee [the quai?] down at Jordan Marsh's warehouse in the summertime. Can you imagine doing that today?

PB: No I can't.

JS: I never did much creosoting. I never wanted to.

PB: I have but I never did it in the summer. Some people would blister right up. I didn't blister. It didn't bother me that much. I remember hitting them up with an axe.

JS: I did a little of it but not much. It was hard work.

PB: When the sun hit it, as you drive to the job, you could see it in the air.

JS: I often wonder how much cancer came out of that. But who knows?

PB: Maybe that's what got me.

JS: Something to think about.

PB: Yeah I had lung cancer. I don't think the smoking had anything to do with it. [bursts out laughing] Had to be the creosote; the three packs of cigarettes a day didn't do it.

MH: When did you stop smoking?

PB: When did I stop? When they took my lung out.

MH: So you have one lung.

PB: No, no, they just took a piece. I'm the luckiest guy in the world, believe me. That was 11 years ago.

JS: I used to think about that, welding on the grid work. You know you strike an arc and the stuff would have creosote on it.

PB: So many things, I don't think they use it anymore. Do they? They still use creosote?

JS: I think it's illegal.

PB: Some people, it was so bad to them that they just couldn't do it. If there was a job with creosote they'd have to get laid off. Because they couldn't work on it. Couldn't even work near it. It would just burn the skin.

JS: Some people would be worse than others. I remember guys used to coat themselves in vaseline. I never worked on it in the summer. Seems like every time I worked on it, it was in the winter.

MH: Is it only used when you're working in water?

PB: Oh no, it used to be creosote piles. Wood piles. They were all soaked in it.

JS: Preservative. But the next thing that came along is outlawed too. Because it had arsenic in it. And the pressure treated wood that you're dealing with today is going to go out in the next couple of years.

PB: There doesn't seem to be much good in anything.

MH: So they're going to stop using wood? What are they going to do?

JS: They're going to have to change the preservative. They'll come up with something else. How safe it will be, I don't know.

PB: Well that's it. It will last for so long before they do enough studies on it and find that some moused died or something. That's basically what it comes down to. It's like the allar for the apples. . .

JS: But some of those guys, when I first started in the tunnels working for Charlie Faulkner - he was Irish and he worked in England. That would be 1960 and I gathered Charlie to be in his fifties at the time. But when he broke in, drilling, they were doing it with sledge hammers and ratchet bits. One guy turning the bit, the other guy hitting it with a hammer. And caissons at that time, he worked somewhere in New York. I knew guys that went in caissons under air for only 15 minutes at a time because of the air pressure. So you wonder how much damage that does to you. I do. I knew guys with the bends in the tunnels.

MH: From the Callan?

JS: Callahan, yeah. Moby Dick did. Died while I was in the army. But other guys I know that got very sick with it and then later on I know guys that had trouble at the bends.

You know when you're making your living then it's like fishermen --
Newfoundlanders never swam, know how to swim.

PB: No, they didn't have to. They knew that if you hit the water you were dead anyway. I remember them talking about they'd have to keep somebody out with an axe all the time, to keep the hatches open.

MH: Cause of the ice?

PB: Yeah. The ice was so bad, always the mist and building up ice. You'd have to have somebody 24 hours a day with an axe to keep things open. Paddy Grophee. Remember Pat?

JS: Blonde Pat.

PB: Blondie Pat. Good guy. He used to fish a lot.

MH: Did you guys have nicknames? Sounds like everybody has a nickname.

PB: I never did, no.

JS: No, I don't think so. Mary asked what name I got. Some say Jack, some say Sullie, some say Jackie. I use Sean most of the time.

PB: Do you?

MH: Well that's the Irish name.

JS: I was always called Sean.

PB: I never even heard of that.

JS: No, not on construction. But some of them do, the Irish guys. Oh, you mean Sean.

MH: Now was there a lot of drinking?

PB: Oh yeah. [soft laughter]

JS: Yeah, I started to say that before. In the tunnels especially. There was some heavy drinking. That was a good thing in a way cause you couldn't do that today.

PB: Everybody used to head for the bar at lunch.

JS: I can actually remember tying a guy off in the tunnel with a rope. Old Rupert, we tied him off. We were foremen by that time. But he was so popular and so well liked, we tied him off to the scaffold and left him there til he sobered up at the end of the shift. But the bad part about it is, I've worked with operators, I'm not picking on operators but I don't want an operator drinking.

PB: But that was never thought of back then.

JS: Things were different. It was more manual work.

PB: I remember something - a couple of the operators used to go out with you at lunch too. I never saw it, but I remember them talk about one guy, I won't remember the name, but he use to operate the rig with a bottle right beside him. Good operator too. Those things, back then, that's the way it was. I remember the old, remember the Rock? The bar across from the Prudential. That was one of the last bars around when the Prudential was done and the Hancock was starting. That was one of the last little joints there were. Cause I was working at the Christian Science at the time. We used to walk up to the Rock for lunch. You'd get a sandwich a beer in there. It was so crowded that you'd end up getting a couple of beers and you'd go outside. Eat on the sidewalk on Huntington Ave.

JS: Dining al fresco.

PB: That could never happen nowadays. Thank God. You couldn't get in there. It was so packed.

MH: There's another bar that just closed called My Brother's Place.

PB: Oh sure. Is it closed?

MH: Yeah.

PB: We used to go there. It's right on the corner of Stuart and Columbus. You gotta go in one door and out the other. My Brother's Place. Me and Woody used to go there.

MH: One day I looked out my window and they were carting away the sign.

PB: Really? I remember I used to go there often when we were doing any of the work up in Copley Square. Get in the company truck.

JS: Well you know Woody, right?

MH: No -

PB: Dave. Dave Woodman.

MH: Oh, you call him Woody. See that's what I'm talking about. Nicknames.

PB: Well he used to drive the truck. There was another place down in Park Square, right near where the car wash is. It was a little small place and there was a young guy that owned it. The only thing you could get to eat in there was hotdogs.

Steamed hotdogs. That place was another place that was packed, for years. My Brothers Place was pretty good. The sandwiches were decent.

MH There is tons of construction around there.

PB: But see the bars don't make it now with the construction, because the construction guys, after they don't go out.

JS: Everybody is heading to the suburbs. The whole climate has changed.

PB: I remember when they used to have the union meeting. Remember the union meetings at -

MH: Where would they have them?

PB: This was in Copley Square. 2500 Huntington Ave. Right across from the Westin. There's a little pie-shaped building but it's all done over. It used to be right there up on the 3rd floor. There was a bar room on the street level - the Stuart House. At the union meetings, everybody would be there before the meeting. Then after the meeting, everyone would be in there. If there was a vote, an election, everybody would be in there. You couldn't get in there.

JS: No.

PB: I remember walking across the tables, trying to get out of there.

MH: Do they have them here now?

PB: Now, they have them at the KFC in Charlestown. I guess they still go to the bar across the street.

JS: Because the Sandhogs hall was Hibernian at the Colonial.

MH: Oh really?

JS: Yeah. They were side by side.

MH: Did you ever, when you were younger, go to dances?

JS: Yeah, I used to wonder how that floor would stand up.

MH: Yeah, I know there were like 1200 people in there.

JS: More. Cause I worked there when I was in high school. In the coat room. Cause my [?] had an Irish orchestra and my father and him had a lease for two years at InterColonial.

MH: What was your cousin's name?

JS: Johnny Powell. He was a good guy.

MH: Oh I know. I've heard stories about him.

JS: Well, not to get fresh, the Irish word for manure would be coc maudlin {spelling??} He's got a gig in Chicago. The restaurant was famous, their reputation was on having whatever you wanted. And if they didn't have it, they would have it for your next visit. And they went around the table taking the order and Johnny ordered coc maudlin. Waiter goes in the kitchen, saying, "I don't know what the hell he's talking about." He comes out and says, "No, the chef says he doesn't have it today, but if you come in next week, it'll be here." [laughter]

When my father and Johnny and Mikey Powell had the lease, they only had it for holiday dances. I can remember 1500 tickets. A good many Newfoundlaners used to go there. The Rose Croix. Geez that floor used to be going up and down like this; it's a wonder it didn't collapse. And they used to go to both halls. They'd buy a tick on a holiday, like on St. Patrick's Eve and New Years. Most of them would go back and forth. Most of them were construction workers at that time.

MH: I've heard many stories about that time.

JS: Oh yeah.

MH: There's a guy, probably about your age named Joe Derrane.

JS: Joe Derrane, yeah, he played with Johnny. Accordion player. He's having a comeback now. At his age. He's a great player.

MH: He went 35 years without playing. . .

JS: [talks about a book he has at home that traces the cultures of civilization through folk history. His cousin is married to professor at University of Galway that studies this.]

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