

M: --this tape with you. I mean I know it's your right now, but when I get a bunch of tapes laying around I want know what--

Bill: It's Bill Smith, want address too?

M: No, no, that's all right. Tell me a bit about yourself, how you got into the basket business and songs and tales and--

Bill: Well I'm Bill Smith and I grew up here in the Adirondacks. In fact I grew up on that hill right up there that you were lookin' at a few minutes ago. And that's where I was born. I was the youngest of 10 kids and we lived the last place on the road. And from there through to Cranberry Lake it about 36 miles. And it's 40 some miles east and west that there isn't anything in there. So there's nothing in that area. And all the lumberjacks and all the hunter and the trappers and the guides and all the people that used to go into the Adirondacks would all stop at our place on the way into the woods there. Well I shouldn't say in the Adirondacks, in this area I should say. And they would stop there and my mother generally would make 'em a big meal before they went into the woods and that, and besides all the 10 children she had about 10 or 15 other people there all the time that she was feeding or putting up for the night or whatever. Some slept in the barn, some slept in the house and get up in the morning and you'd be

stepping over all these people and I remember my mother use to have two tables that sat there on the side and she had 'em just covered with pies and cakes and donuts and all kinds of--and bread and all kinds of things before--you know--by six o'clock in the morning all this was already done and she'd been up since 3 o'clock making all these things. That was the day's baking. She baked every day for all these people. And so I got to meet a lot of interesting people. So my stories and my songs and all that comes from the lumberjacks and from the local people over at Cook's Corner Store and all these people. And I learned to make baskets, actually by watching Mohawk Indians from the St. Regis Reservation, known as Aquasasnee, down near Meseena. And they were lumberjacks that worked up in the woods. They're Native American people that worked as lumberjacks. And they use to stop at the house all times, became friends with the family same as everybody else did. And in the mud season, in the fly season when they weren't workin' in the woods, why they would stop by and pound the ash trees and make baskets. And so I grew up around people makin' baskets from the time I was 3-4 years old. Old enough to know anything, until I was in my middle teens. And 'course I followed 'em around and watched them and any time you ask them anything they wouldn't tell you anything. They'd say oh that's an old Indian trick. So you learned by watching.

And of course I learned a lot of things, I learned-- We had a small farm there, I worked on the farm too and so I knew a lot about--I really didn't know a lot about anything--I knew a little bit about everything, I should say. I knew about farming, I knew about cutting logs and cutting pulp wood and stove wood and fire wood and a little bit about cutting trails and marking trails and a little bit about surveying and a little bit about a lot of how to build things that were needed. And so I grew up with a lot of this knowledge that I am passing on today because of the people that came there, you know. And so the Indian people would make all these different kinds of baskets and that and I watched them and just knew how to make baskets by the time I was a teenager by growing up in that atmosphere, see. And I had always been a trapper and a guide and all and a hunter and a fisherman, and all and needed a pack basket. And I used the pack basket. I've got probably thousands of miles on pack baskets 'cause I've certainly got more than hundreds of miles on 'em 'cause I've been all over the woods with pack basket on my back. When I was trapping one year, I think it was the spring trappin' season, my basket went to pieces and of course Stella and I were married by then and the basket went to pieces and I needed another one. I had been buying one about every year and they weren't any good. They were real thin. Because the Indian people that were making the

baskets realized that the ash trees had a blight and so there's a way you can split one piece of ash into--one yearly ring I should say, into two pieces, making it thinner. And they were making 'em so thin they were almost like tissue paper. And they weren't any good. Your traps would just go right through the bottom of 'em. So I got disgusted one day and I said I don't know why that I keep buyin' these baskets every year 'cause they're not any good. And I said I knew how to make those things when I was a kid. Well Stella spoke up and she said why you don't know how to make those things do you? 'Cause she was from Buffalo and she wasn't use ta the country ways, you know, and that. And well sure, I said, I know how to make 'em I watched Indian people make 'em when I was a kid. So I went out back to prove to her that I could make 'em. And I cut down as ash tree and pounded it and made 3 or 4 baskets and people saw them and wanted 'em and I've been makin' 'em ever since. That's how I got into the basket business. And then later on I went--Pardon?

M: What about the music and other things?

Bill: Well that came--I'll tell you about that. Built the baskets--or later on. See I worked in construction in summer and in the wintertime I'd work around in the woods or whatever and trapping and whatever living off the land sort of. And one day I got mad at the boss and I quit. And I

came home and I started making baskets and snowshoes and canoe paddles and all kinds of things that I knew how to make, rustic furniture and whatever. And that's how I come to start workin' for myself. And the songs and the stories came about by hearing all these stories and that from the lumberjacks and that. And the songs, a lot of them, came from my mother, because my mother used to sing all the time. She always was singing, even when she was thinking. And I do the same thing. When you're just not doing anything else you got a song going through your mind, or a tune. And you're always humming the tune or something. And she was always singin' songs and that and of course bein' the youngest of ten kids, my brothers and sisters had all grown up and gone away by the time I was 9-10 years old or so. And my dad was working in the woods and that and he was gone too. So that left just the two of us and by this time we had moved over here next door in the big farm house and we had a pretty good sized farm at that time. And her and I took care of that see. And dad wasn't out of the woods yet. And at night it would be so lonesome around there so we'd sing to each other. And that's where the singing started from. And the storytelling, of course, came natural by hearing all these lies and tall tales and stories from other people. If you thought it was funny or cute why you remembered it and you carried it on, tell it to somebody

else. It's no different than any other story--

M: So you're carrying on a tradition.

Bill: Yeah, but I didn't know it.

M: Yeah. Well a lot of these folk singers invent their songs in Greenwich Village, you know, not the same thing.

Bill: Right. Like our Adirondack storyteller from Brooklyn. This needs new strings on it. Well there's a lot of tall tales that went on in the Adirondacks and of course one of the songs that comes to mind when you're thinkin' of tall tales is about the Frozen Logger. Because that's a tall tale in itself. And it's put to song form. It's about this gal in a cafe that told her real sad story to this poor lumberjack going in there for a cup of coffee one night. And of course she knew right away he was a lumberjack just by the way he stirred his coffee. And so she sat down and she told all of her sad woe to him about the poor frozen logger that she used to go out with:

One night while I was seated  
Down in the dim cafe.  
A 30 year old waitress  
To me these words did say:  
I see that you're a logger  
And not just a common bum.  
For no one but a logger stirs  
His coffee with his thumb.  
My lover he was a logger  
Oh, and a good one they say  
What you'd pour whiskey on it  
He'd eat a bale of hay.  
He never shed his whiskers

From up his horny hide  
Why he'd drive 'em with a hammer  
And just bit them off inside.  
One time he came to see me  
On a cold and wintery day.  
Oh he held me in a fond embrace  
And broke three vertebrae.  
He kissed when he left me  
So hard he broke my jaw.  
And I could not speak to tell  
Him that he forget his mackinaw.  
(You know what a mackinaw is?)  
I watched lover leavin'  
Go sauntering through the snow.  
He was headed bravely homeward  
At 48 below.  
Oh the weather it tried to  
Freeze him.  
Oh it tried it's level best.  
And at a 100 degrees below zero  
Why he buttoned up his vest.  
It froze clear down to China  
It froze to the skies up above.  
At a 1000 degrees below zero  
Oh it froze my lover love.  
Now they tried their best to save him  
And if you believe me sir,  
They made him into axe blades  
To chop the douglas fir.  
And so I lost my lover  
And to this cafe he'd come  
And here I wait till someone  
Stirs his coffee with his thumb.