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Transcript of DARE Interview (1968): Big Stone Gap, Virginia; Primary Informant VA002 (Tape 1684-S1)

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INTRODUCTION: The following was recorded from Dictionary of American Regional English, tape one six eight four, side one.

FIELDWORKER: This is a recording of Mrs. Margaret [beep], made at Big Stone Gap, Virginia on June twenty-two by [beep].

- 5 INFORMANT: Ready? The story of Arthur the Rat. Once upon a time, there was a young rat who couldn't make up his mind. Wherever the other rats asked him if he would like to come out hunting with them, he would answer in a hoarse voice, "I don't know." And when they said, "Would you rather stay inside?" he wouldn't say yes, or, or no either. He'd always shirk making a choice. One fine day, his Aunt Josephine said to him, "Now look here! No one will ever care
10 for you if you carry on like this. You have no more mind of your own than a greasy old blade of grass. The young rat coughed and looked wise, as usual, but said nothing. "Don't you think so?" said his aunt, stomping with her foot, for she couldn't bear to see the young rat so cold-blooded. "I don't know," was all he ever answered, and then he'd walk off to think for an hour or more, whether he should stay in his hole in the ground or go out into the loft. One night the
15 rats heard a loud noise in the loft. It was a very dreary old place. The roo-, roof let the rain come washing in. The beans, beams and rafters had all rotted through, so that the whole thing was quite unsafe. At last, one of the joists gave way, and the beam fell with one edge on the floor. The walls shook, the cupol-, ola fell off and all the rats' hair stood on end with fear and horror. "This won't do," said their leader. "We can't stay cooped up here any longer." So they
20 sent out, so they sent out scouts to search for a new home. A little later on that evening, the scouts came back and said they had found an old-fashioned horse barn where there would be room and board for all of them. The leader gave the order at once. "Company, fall in!" And the rats crawled out of their holes right away and stood on the floor in a long line. Just then the old rat caught sight of a young, young Arthu— that was the name of the shirker. He wasn't in the
25 line, and he wasn't exactly outside it. He stood just by it. "Come on, get in line," growled the old rat coarsely. "Of course, you're coming too." "I don't know," said Arthur calmly. "Why, the ideal [sic] of it. You don't think it's safe here anymore, do you?" "I'm not certain," said Arthur, undaunted [sic]. "The roof may not fall down yet." "Well," said the old rat, "we can't wait for

30 you to join us." Then he turned to the others and shouted, "Right about face! March!" and the long line marched out of the barn while the young rat watched them. "I think I'll go tomorrow," he said to himself, "but, then again, perhaps I won't. It's so nice and snug in h-, snug here. I guess I'll go back to my hole under the log for a while, just to make up my mind." But during the night, there was a big crash. Down came beams, rafters, joists—the whole business. Next morning—it was a foggy day—some men came to look over the damage. It seemed odd to
35 them that the old building was not haunted by rats. But, at last, one of them happened to move a board, and he caught sight of a young rat, quite dead, half in and half out of his hole. Thuh-, there's the shirker got his dues, and there was no mourning for him. Uh, last May, it was about the first of May when the people of Artesian Well Hollow organized a community center in the Hollow. We used an old house to, um, for the center. And we also had community meetings in
40 this house. And, uh, we, uh, had clothing, used clothing, that we let people have for a very small price, which the money we took from this clothing, we put it back into the community fund. But at the time we used all the money to repair the building. And then we started making the banners. We begin to have banner meetings, and, uh, the first banner was made in Artesian Well Hollow. And, uh, we make up our own patterns as we go. We have some patterns that was
45 made up by, uh, different people that, uh, from the Holy Cross Center. But most of the patterns are made up just by the individual that makes the banners. We make these banners, and we also make bags. These banners are took to different cities like, um, Ohio, and, uh, uh, Knoxville and West Virginia, and different places they're sold. The banners are sold for five dollars each. But there's one dollar comes out of each banner that is used to buy more material in order to
50 make more banners, so—

FIELDWORKER: What kind of materials are you using?

INFORMANT: We use, uh, to make the banners, they're made from burlap. And, uh, we use, uh, yarn, uh, cotton thread to, uh, sew them. And we also, uh, sometimes we do applique work. But mostly we do embroidery or, uh, different kinds stitching that, uh, whatever the pattern might
55 call for.

FIELDWORKER: Could you describe some of the designs for me?

INFORMANT: Well, we have a design of the little people, that's two people together hand in hand; uh, a symbol of friendship. And then we have the sun banner that is made in the shape of the sun. And we also have the sun bags. And then we have the, uh, what we call the flowered
60 banners that are made up of, uh, bouquets of flowers, and baskets, and, uh, just different kinds of flowers, whatever that, uh, the individual might feel that he'd like to put on his banner. And, uh, we have, uh, have made the, uh, um—I can't think of it.

FIELDWORKER: The mountain scene?

INFORMANT: The mountains. We have made the scenes of the mountain, and, uh, we've also,
65 uh, made cushions. We've made cushions and chair covers. And, uh, we've made dolls from, uh, art foam. And we're still making the banners, though, but the dolls we're not making anymore.

And, uh, we're supposed to have a community meeting Tuesday in order to organize a playground in the bottom in Artesian Well Hollow. [cough] First. And, I had, uh, been hoeing corn all day, and I'd laid down on the sofa.

70 FIELDWORKER: Uh, what, uh, what happened before this?

INFORMANT: I'd been hoeing corn, and I took a headache, and, uh, it was real hot, I'd got too hot. And I'd laid down on the sofa, I thought, if I take a Bufferin and lay down it'd get all right. And, so, uh, I had just went off to sleep and Cathy come through and said, "Mommy, get up," said, "somebody wants to see you." So I thought it was somebody, you know, just around home
75 there. I got up and I started to the door, and didn't have my shoes on. And I peeked and I seen who it was, so, I told Dawn, I said, I said, "Bring me my shoes." So she went and got them, and I went out, and hit was two men from Washington that was wanting to talk to me about the, uh, different poverty programs in this area. And, uh, I was talking to them, but yet I was, I felt to I was half asleep. And, they was asking me what I felt about, um, the poverty programs that was
80 in Virginia. And, uh, I worked in one of the programs for a year and a, a little over a year. And, I thought it, at that time, we did make quite a bit of progress, because we was just starting the thing, and really we was give the pattern, and we, we made it what it was. And then it come up to a point, we started work in August, and then when we, we was laid off in August. We got our certificates in econom-, home economics. And the same women that I worked with and trained
85 with this whole year, why, there was three of them that stayed on, and six of us that was laid off. And, uh, Mr. [beep], he was project director at that time, over the Aware Center. So, he didn't agree, he said he thought they was taking a step backward by laying off their trained women, you know, and taking in more women, to have to train, you know. That they wasn't making any progress, that they was just a-going in circles, which they were. And, so, he was laid
90 off also, and, uh, up to this date, um, the Aware Program, uh, most people, the poor people of Wise County, they really don't know what the program is. You can talk to them, and they say, "Well, I don't know what they're doing over there. I know it's a, it's supposed to be some kind of a government program," but they don't realize the program is for them. That is was appropriated for them, that the program's being funded for their benefit, And that it's
95 supposed to be a-making progress towards their interest. They don't even know that. Because we was told, when we worked in the center, not to tell people that it was a government program. That it was sponsored by the government. And, uh, up to this date, I don't, well, myself, I don't see any progress they're making at all. And they're not having any classes in the center anymore. So, it looks to me like a waste of money to keep this thing going, and looks like
100 the money could be put into something that would really help poor people, that they could get the benefit from. Uh, as far as I can see, the ones that is working directly in the program, is the only ones that is benefitting from it. And, that's about all I'd have to say on it.

I was borned and raised in, born and raised until I was s-, about six years old at Linden, Virginia. My father was a coal miner, he run the pumps in the mines. And, we lived in the mining camp,
105 and our whole family was raised in mining camps until I was six years old and we moved onto a

farm. There, we just, uh, had truck patches, like corn and potatoes, and vegetables. We stayed there until I was about eight years old. Then we moved back to town. My father bought a place in Appalachia, Virginia. We lived there for about a year. And we moved to Exeter, that's another mining camp. By that time, my father was disable to work in the mines, and he was retired. But my brothers, they worked in the mines. So, we lived in Exeter for approximately two years.

110 FIELDWORKER: What kind of jobs did your brothers have?

INFORMANT: They were coal loaders. One brother was a coal loader, and the other brother run a cutting machine in the mines. And, uh, then I had a, another brother that, uh, run a motor. I had five brothers in all.

115 FIELDWORKER: What's a motor?

INFORMANT: Eh, the motor is used to pull the cars of coal out of the mines. The, uh, we have a, there's a motorman that drives the motor, and, uh, they hook all the cars, the men loads they're from two to three ton cars, they set these cars into the different places, what they call rooms, or places, in the mines. The men loads them, they get paid by the car, or by the ton. And then when these cars are all loaded, they're hooked to the motor, and the motor pulls them to the outside. There, they're dumped into railroad gons. They're first dumped into what they call a *tipple*. And then the coal, after the tipple is full, they dump the, uh, coal from the tipple into railroad cars, which hauls the coal to different places, wherever it's to be sold at.

FIELDWORKER: About how big is this tipple?

125 INFORMANT: Well, the tipple is a structure of, uh, heavy, uh, uh, two-by-fours, and four-by-eights, and it's mostly just heavy collars that it's made out of, uh, flattened log-like things, shaped. And, uh, they have a big chute, that they can let up and down by a, a cable. And the tipple holds about, well it all varies, different tipples is different sizes, but they can take in about a hundred tons of coal. And this coal is just dumped in there, maybe for a week's time, it's dumped in there, until it's full. And then when it's full, why, the railroad cars comes in, and they let this chute down, and it dumps the coal out of the tipple into the railroad gons. And, uh, they take it to where it's going to be sold.

130 FIELDWORKER: You said it was made of collars?

INFORMANT: Yeah, uh, it's wooden, big wooden beams that it's made of. Instead of using, you know, like steel beams, they use wood.

135 FIELDWORKER: And those are called collars?

INFORMANT: Yeah. But now in the larger mines, they use, uh, better material, because they have, you know, they ship a lot more coal than smaller mines do. And I think they use, uh, mostly, well, they have the steel tracks and everything where the cars can run out on and dump. But the smaller mines, they don't have that. [cough]

140

FIELDWORKER: Are there m-, is there much coal mining done around here now?

INFORMANT: Not very much. That's the, uh, cause of all the unemployment in this area, is because the main source of employment here has, and always has been mining, coal mining, because that is the one mineral we have here that could be mined, and, uh, sold. But, absentee
145 owners owns all the coal mines. And, uh, all the, uh, minerals from Virginia is being shipped out. There's not too much tax even being paid to the state of Virginia for its own minerals. It's being shipped away. Because, uh, they don't have the mineral rights to their minerals. And, uh, [cough]...

Back in about nineteen and thirty-nine was when the mining shutdown come here. Most of the
150 big mines closed down. And, uh, that's when the, uh, big, uh, number of unemployed men took place here. And they've never been reemployed. And then we had another shutdown in about nineteen and forty-five. And there was hundreds of men again that was out of work. Some of them was called back, and some wasn't. We don't have but about, about three big mines now operating in southwest Virginia. And most of the people that lived here and's been raised here,
155 the only skills they have is mining. And most of them don't have an education high enough to get a skilled job anywhere. And, uh, that's why, that we need our minerals here in southwest Virginia. We need them left here, or we need to have a right to them, to have some kind of a factory put up here, until the minerals could be manufactured right here in Virginia. And that way, it would employ the men that has been put out of the mines on the lack of not having
160 enough coal, because they've stripped most of the mines, and the, uh, the big mines that's already worked out, they're stripping them. They have stripped them, and that has made the land in lots of places look terrible. Because they, they've not re-fixed it after, uh, stripping for the coal, and lots of slides comes, and endangers peoples' homes a lot, too. But, yet, they, they don't have anything to say about it because they are all operating under an absentee
165 ownership, and...

FIELDWORKER: Would you mind repeating some of the stories you were telling at supper tonight?

INFORMANT: Oh, I'd love to. I'd like to tell one that my mother has told me when I was small. We used to sit around of a evening after the work was done, and she'd sit and tell us stories.
170 And this story was supposed to have been true, was back when she was a s-, a small girl. This happened in her neighborhood where she lived. This, uh, boy, um, and his family lived there, they was wealthy people. And, uh, this boy in the family, why, he began to get terribly frail. And he was tired all the time, and he'd wake up of a morning so tired that he could hardly move. And his father took him to all kinds of doctors, and paid out all kinds of money to try to get
175 something done for him. But no one could do him any good, and the doctors couldn't find anything wrong with him. So, uh, this man, he put out a word that, uh, anyone that could do anything for his son, he would give them five hundred dollars. So this man was, uh, somewhere around Merlin, he heard about it. And s-, course back in those days, it was horse and buggy

180 days, and hit took months to travel from Merlin through to Virginia. And, uh, by horse. So, this man, he came, and he said he could, uh, cure this boy.

FIELDWORKER: What kind of man was this?

185 INFORMANT: He was supposed to have been a witch doctor. And he said the boy had a witch charm on him, and that he would never be no better until the charm had been broke. So, he said he could break the charm, but he would have to spend a few weeks in the home of the, where the boy lived. So he came, and en-, the father agreed that he would let him try. So they set and watched the boy each night after he had gone to bed. And on the third night, the, uh, doctor said that he would pretend he was leaving, that ever who had the charm on the boy must be a-watching and knowed that he was there, was the reason that they hadn't done anything during the period he-, time he'd been there. So he pretended to leave, and after dark
190 he slipped back. So, sure enough that night, why, the boy got up just as if he was in his sleep. And he went for a walk, and there was a big tree about a mile from the house. And when he got there, why, he, uh, got down on his hands and knees. And there was a big black cat come out, and got on his back. So this boy started running, and every morning when he'd, when his parents would go in to wake him, he would be scratched all over by (briars) and, and and his
195 knees would be cut from the stones where he'd been running, but he'd never know what caused it. So, uh, that night they watched him, and they saw this big cat come out and jump on his back. So this man suggest, uh, that is a witch charm. And, he said there's no way to break it, said only by silver bullet. Said that's the only way you can stop a witch. So he took and put a silver bullet in his gun, and he aimed at the cat's paw. So, he cut, uh, shot the cat's paw off. And
200 he told the boy's father, he s-, announced it the next morning, said, uh, "When your work hands comes in," said, "for breakfast," said, "you be sure to notice," and said, "one of them will be missing a right hand." And, sure enough, the next morning, when they come in for breakfast, one of his top work hands come in, and, uh, he had one of his hands gone. And it was his right hand. And so the charm was broke then, and the boy got all right.

205 FIELDWORKER: Um, are there other stories about witches?

INFORMANT: Yes, uh, my mother's told me quite a few stories about witches. Uh, back in, uh, say seventy years ago. And, us children always enjoyed, love, uh, hearing her tell them, and—do you want to hear another one?

FIELDWORKER: Oh, sure.

210 INFORMANT: Wait, I have to find it. I'll tell another one that my mother told me when I was small. This one was true. Uh, my grandfather, he, uh, owned a farm, and he raised pigs and cattle. And, so, back them days, my mother said that when a, a farmer had too many pigs, that, uh, they didn't sell them, that they just give them to their neighbors. And so his, uh, sow had found a litter of pigs. She had fourteen. So Grandpa, he picked out two of the pigs for hisself,
215 and, uh, the neighbor woman that lived near them, why, she come over. And he told her, she wanted some pigs, so he told her to go out and pick out as many as she'd like. But, uh, all

except the two, and he wanted them. So when she'd gone out and looked at the pigs, she wanted the two that he had claimed hisself. So, she got mad. And, uh, she told him, said, "Well," said, "if I can't have them two pigs," said, uh, "nobody'll get them." So, she had, when she started to leave, she went to the hog lot. And, uh, she waved her apron at the hogs, and, uh, the next morning when my grandfather went out to feed them, they were all laying there dead. And the mother pig, hog, she was choking, and, uh, she was almost dead too. And so we don't know for sure if this is witchcraft, or if it's just, uh, an old tale. I don't know which.

My grandmother [beep], back in them days, why, people had to go to mill, they had to, when they raised their corn, they shelled it, and then they'd, uh, take it to the mill to be ground into cornmeal to make their bread. So this day she was, uh, going to the mill. And they had the, there was no roads then, and no cars or anything like that. They went by horse or either horse and buggy. But she was riding a horse, and she had about three miles to go through the mountains to the mill. And there was nothing but just paths, just mountain paths and horse paths then for people to travel. So, uh, she was on her way to the mill, with a turn of corn. And she had this, uh, dark part of the forest to go through. So, she heard this panther, and they sound very much like a woman, back them days, when they would, was running wild in the mountains. So she heard it, and she knowed that it was nearby. And when they sound like they're right at you, they're far away, but when they sound like they're far away, they're right at you, so she knew that, uh, the panther was getting close to her. And she started her horse to running, but it was too late. The panther jumped out of the bushes right behind her in the road. So she ran as fast as she could, And, uh, hit kept gaining on her, and it got close enough to scratch her horse's hip. So, she took off her bonnet, and she throwed it back, and the panther took time to tear it up. So she got a little ahead that time, and he caught up again. So she took off her blouse, and she kept on that way until she had nothing left, except her, uh, riding skirt. And, at last, she throwed her turn of corn off to it. And hit took time to tear it up. And by that time she was coming in sight of the mill. And, she was screaming, and, uh, they was some men standing out at the mill. As usual, they'd stand around and talk, when, while their corn was being ground. And she was screaming, and, uh, that a panther was after her. And she just rounded a little curve. And this panther had stopped to tear the corn up. And, uh, she got, made it into the mill, and the panther come around the cor-, uh, the curve, after he'd tore up her sack of corn. And these men killed it. And it measured ten foot from the tip of its tail to the tip of its nose.

FIELDWORKER: How much is a turn of corn?

INFORMANT: A turn of corn is a gra-, uh, a burlap sack, sometimes half full, sometimes full. Um, they call them small turns or large turns. That's just another way of speaking, you know, for a sack of corn. Another story my mother's told me, and this is true, uh, my aunt she, uh, she was a midwife, back them days, there wasn't very many doctors. And what doctors there was, why they had to be busy a-doctoring diseases, and other sicknesses. And, uh, mostly, all babies was delivered by midwives. So my aunt, and, uh, her little niece lived together. Her niece was

only about seven years old, and they lived in a log cabin. And, uh, people would come for her all hours of the night to go and, and take care of their wives. And this one special night, why, (h)it was real late, and this man come for (her) to go that his wife needed her real bad. So she had no one to leave with the little girl. The little girl's name was Myrtle. And they had just killed
260 hogs, and they had a, um, the place where they kept their meat was a room just off from the, uh, bedroom in the house. And, it was just a log cabin, so, uh, they had put their meat in there, and there was no, there was no windows in there, just little, uh, uh, what they called back then scuttleholes. But it was, uh, boarded until the air could come through, but nothing else could. So their meat was saved, and their windows to the house was up high, and they was small. And,
265 uh, that night, when this man come, and, and wanted her to go with him she had to go about three miles. So she had to leave Myrtle alone, but she barred the doors, and, uh, everything, and Myrtle had heard her say that, uh, you could get rid of bears by throwing hot fire on them, you know. If they smelt wool a-burning, that they would go to fighting. and, uh, run away. So, that night, this, uh, pack of bears come to the cabin while she was gone. And this child was sh-,
270 just there by herself, so they begin to fight just in under her window. And she was so little that she couldn't get up to the window, you know, without crawling, standing up in the bed to look out. And, uh, she looked out, and, uh, these bears had already gnawed one of the logs in two, to go through to the meat, where the meat was. And they did, they had got one gnawed in two, and another one just about gnawed in two. And if they had got that one, gnawed in two, they
275 could have went in to the meat and then come right through where she was, cause there wasn't anything to keep them out. So she got down out of the bed, and went to the fireplace, and took her fire shovel, and got her a shovel of hot, uh, wood, uh, coals, clim back up in the bed, and threwed those coals out the windows on, on that, uh, the bear's back. And they fit, they begin to fight then, and, uh, they all left. But they had killed, some of the bears were there
280 the next morning where they killed each other when, uh, my aunt come back. And when they got to examining the building, why, they just lacked about an inch being through to where she was. And if they'd have went in, why, they'd have tore her up too.