

Mrs. Philpott almost seems to be reading her comments and she is very monotone and steady in her diction for much of the interview. As a result, many of the vocal punctuation clues that I look for seem to be missing. The punctuation that I have put in is what I think/expect it could be, and another person hearing the interview may think that it should be different. The interviewer is never identified, nor where / when the interview takes place. Proper names that I could not verify the spelling of show up in red text. The interviewer's words are in italics.

In 1955, my husband and I bought property in Hampden, Massachusetts. We found out later that our neighbor was Mr. Thornton W. Burgess, the author of children's nature stories. He was our neighbor and personal friend for ten years. Mr. Burgess had a wonderful sense of humor that people did not realize. We found out him to be a delightful gentleman. He lived with Kate Jones and Frank Jones, his caretaker, nurse, and typist, and friend. Frank was his caretaker of the place. He'd take flowers and take care of things, and he also worked for a florist. Mr. Burgess had three nicknames. One was 'Gramps with a twinkle in his eyes.' The other was, he loved to wear bow ties and Bermuda shorts and got the nickname of 'Spiffy.' The other one was the 'Pied Piper of introducing children to nature.' We found in his stories, in the beginning, he taught children a little way of being decent, young adults to come up and respect our love of nature. He was a wonderful gentleman. We found out his favorite animal was the skunk. He said the skunk minded his own business, used his odor as defense not offense, and he was very polite. He would stamp his feet, growl, put his body into a letter "U", and lift his tail. You'd better be long gone, because that's the way he protected. Mr. Burgess' sense of humor came forth when he used to come and visit my mother, who was an artist and a ceramist. My grandmother was of his age. Kate called up one day, Mr. Burgess was missing. Gramps had come up to visit my mother and grandmother, so I called him on the intercom, and I'll never forget what he said – "Ah shucks! She found me again." And he was up here visiting. He would come up and get rhubarb and make rhubarb sauce. He also had me bake a cookie I called 'four [or 'for?'] generations.'

### Break in taping

Mr. Burgess would fish in the morning for his breakfast, and they would take ... Now, Mr. Burgess didn't know how to type very well, so Kate Jones would type. He used to hen and peck two fingers. We used to laugh about that. And he would get up early in the morning, 'cause he said his thoughts were clearer, and do most of his writing. We found him to be a delightful gentleman and a wonderful neighbor. He was old fashioned in many ways. And people did not understand, as he got deaf in his older age he couldn't hear as well, and he might have been a little bit sharp tongued. People should understand, this was not his fault. We always found him to be delightful. Always willing to do. When we had the horse club meet up above, Mr. Burgess used to go up and tell stories for them. That was another thing he did. He always said he envied other people, because when they were asked to donate they could say 'no', but he could never, because he was expected to give, which he gladly did. He wrote over 15000 stories and over 70 books, and everybody loved him. He always was willing to do for anyone he could, and always helpful on nature and all about the birds, the bees, and everything.

*Do you know anything about the Green Meadows Club?*

The Green Meadows Club was the young adults that came to work as volunteers. We had a **Mr. Larry Deming** that got hold of some second hand brick and laid all the brick walks at Laughing Brook. **Mr. Deming** was well known as a wood carver and he made me, as a surprise, the miniature Salem rocker, which was Mr. Burgess' favorite rocker, because it fit his back. He was very comfortable in it. Another thing that he always liked was meeting people. One time I heard, through Mr. Burgess, that Admiral Hartung of the USS Chicago\* navy ship was a friend of his and gave him the USS Chicago navy bell on his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was not too sure of it, but I told **Mr. Bonney**. And I was doing a tour, and an elderly lady spoke to me. She said 'that is absolutely true. Admiral Hartung is my neighbor, and I will see that he sends a letter to **Mr. Bonney**.' He did send the letter and verified that it was true.

*Good. What do you know about any conservation efforts that he was involved in? Or did he have children come here for classes?*

He come ... had the children come for story hour. He had what he called a 'story log'. The children would choose the log and he would tell the story the length of the logs; then, after they got through, if a spark flew towards one of the children, with the cage to protect them, if the spark flew, that person could choose the story of the next meeting, at the hour. And he was very good. One of our boys took on the role of Mr. Burgess one time. Did it perfectly. Because Mr. Burgess wore his glasses down on his nose many times. And he would sit in the rocker, and do it to perfection. In fact, he did it so well, a girl had come with her daughter, who is an adult now, and said if she had not looked at the fellow, she thought it was Mr. Burgess. He did it to perfection. And his name was **Bob Spear**. He was one of our naturalists at Laughing Brook.

*Do you know anything about the Radio Nature League?*

I don't know too much about it, but a lot of people ... **Tom Colton** always spoke of him. He said he was a wonderful man. He would always go on TV whenever they asked him. He'd do a lot of programs. He also wanted to protect the land, but mostly, his old mans dream, was to save Laughing Brook for families to enjoy.

**Break in taping**

... Springfield for a while, and my dad used to check the house for him. It was **[indecipherable]**. And his first wife died in childbirth, and then he married a second wife. And his granddaughter, **Francis Mekus**, has wrote a book on Mr. Burgess himself.

*Yes. Yes. And you played Mother West Wind at the Sanctuary for how long?*

32 years.

32 years.

Yes.

*Was it like a weekly story time, or ...*

I did the costume in ... I ... excuse me; I wore the costume for the tours. Then I run into a little difficulty, because one of the ladies was upset. And I told Major **Benton's wife, Jo**, that I wouldn't wear the costume if it upset any of the guides. And she told me that Mother West Wind character was very important. She wanted me to continue. But I wore the costume for nature tours, storytelling, and house tours. I did the house tours under the guidance of **Mrs. Page**, who was an antique dealer, and she taught me the importance of antiques. What ... the most important thing in the house is Mr. Burgess's cradle -- his baby cradle is there. It has a hood on it. The reason is to keep the draft off the baby. And he said they used to sit in a rocker and rock the cradle at the same time when they were rocking. And that was very important. And then on his kitchen door is a ... can't think what the animal is now ...

*A bear.*

Yeah. It's a bear claw that's scratching. And then we had a lady come through, after he passed away, made a hooked rug of the Burgess's home and gave it to us as a gift. It's a hooked rug there.

*I saw the vittles ... I came many years ago and saw the little characters, the little Burgess characters, that someone had made.*

Alright. Now, that's what I was trying to remember. Stop and think of her name ... the man that did all the wood carving was from New York State. And they gave the whole collection of the Burgess characters that are in the house, in exchange for some Burgess books. There are only three collections. We are lucky to have one. **[Indecipherable]** in New York has one, and his wife has one. The mans name is **Len Moritz** his wife was ... **Moritz** ... I can't think of her first name. But he was the wood carver, and every one of the characters are done with a special tool. The a ... some of them have got details, like a top hat on one of the animals that was known. The other important thing to remember is Peter Rabbit is Beatrix Potter of England's character. Peter Cottontail is Burgess's character. But Burgess was godfather to Peter Rabbit, and knew Beatrix Potter.

*Ahhh.*

'Aunt Sally', who was a close friend of his in Sandwich, had a night club in her woodshed. The animals would come in. Her father found the Sandwich Islands; her name is Rebecca Cook. Mr. Burgess used to go in at night, and lay on the floor, and the wild animals would just walk all over him. She had a three-legged raccoon she named "Crippy". And she would feed that. But she also had a woodchuck. They put a bib on her, and she'd sit and eat at the table.

*Oh, my.*

And this was memories that Mr. Burgess shared with me. And they never let on that they had the night club. That's why he called her 'Aunt Sally'. He never let on who she really was. That was a secret he kept from people. But that was a true story. And there's pictures of her, and a book of her. 'Aunt Sally' book, that's very interesting.

*Yes. Yes. I believe all the proceeds from that book went to her.*

Yup. Yup.

*Book that he wrote.*

Yup.

*Did you ever meet his son?*

No. No, I've only met the granddaughter. I never met Mr. Cady, but the girl who used to take care of me at [\[indecipherable\]](#) knew Mr. Cady. She has some autographed books. I have some that'll go the Laughing Brook ... the historical society.

*Yeah.*

They want them, to keep in memory here. Laughing Brook is opening up the 26<sup>th</sup> but they're just going have walking hikes, that's it. And it specifies no animals. And off the cuff ... I want to talk to you off the cuff after [\[indecipherable\]](#).

*And have you been in his writers building, up on the top of the hill?*

I was up there, they pulled a surprise party on me up there, too.

*Ahhh.*

It's neglected. Everything is neglected now. But the house is under historical society, so they got control of that I believe. But other than that, it's been a ghost town.

*Does the caretaker still live in the house?*

They've turned the house into the staff house now. There's an article's just come out of the paper.

*Oh, I have it here. Yeah.*

Yeah.

*I have to look at it.*

And it says the 26<sup>th</sup>, it tells you what they're going to do. Now, off the cuff, I will be honest with you about something.

*Break in taping*

*Let it go for just a little bit.*

Tell me when.

*Just ... go ahead.*

Mr. Burgess' second wife had a hard time with ... 'cause of his deafness, of making him hear, when she wanted him to come to lunch. So one day she decided to pick up the shell called 'tritons trumpet.' It's the one like the Hawaiians call for the tribal meetings. It can be heard five miles away, and sounds like a foghorn. Well, Mr. Burgess came on time.

*Was this here at Laughing Brook?*

Yes.

*[Laughter]*

And, I had the picture, I don't know how I got it, I don't remember, but it come out in the newspaper. And I gave it to **Fran Dutell**. **Fran Dutell** had a copy made, and there's a picture in the house now. And **Francis Mecus** took it and put it in her book of her gramps. So again, I was able to return.

*Yeah. Yeah.*

Yup.

*Good.*

*Break in taping*

Ok. Mr. Burgess was at Mary Lyon's Nursing Home, and he had a commitment to have the children come in and they'd read a story. Well, Mr. Levine was the man in charge, and he was in the nurse's office, and he heard Mr. Burgess's voice. And they run like mad into the room. Mr. Burgess was sitting up in bed with a ... what do you call them here ... tape recorder ...

*Tape recorder. Yeah.*

That's what I was trying to ... with the story on it. And he was sitting up in bed and mouthing the words, so he wouldn't disappoint the second grade children.

*Cause he had had a stroke, huh?*

Yeah.

*Yeah.*

Yeah. He couldn't speak. And **Ernestine Johnston** was the secretary.

**Break in taping**

Many of the visitors come through and tell me that Peter Rabbit is Mr. Burgess's character. I would like to correct it. Mr. Burgess always said Beatrix Potter, of England, is the originator of Peter Rabbit. He was known as godfather to the character; knew Beatrix very, very well. But his character was Peter Cottontail.

Perfect.

**End of taping**

\* There are four surface naval vessels that have been named "USS Chicago" and this may be referring to the heavy cruiser USS Chicago (CA-136) commissioned January 1945 under Capt. Richard R. Hartung, USN. This ship was decommissioned and then later was re-commissioned and reclassified as the guided missile cruiser USS Chicago (CG-11) in 1964.