

[William Hall—East Otis]

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STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER EDWARD WELCH

ADDRESS 112 NORTH STREET, PITTSFIELD

DATE OF INTERVIEW FEBRUARY 1, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT WILLIAM HALL

Library of Congress

ADDRESS EAST OTIS POSTOFFICE

Bill Hall is forty-five years old, five feet eight, one hundred and eighty pounds of handsome manhood. His once blonde hair is now grey, but his blue eyes are as merry and gay as when I first [knew?] him over thirty years ago. Bill speaks in a low voice dragging his words out with precision, carefully selecting words and phrases. Now and then he will use a word or a phrase typical of the Berkshire hill towners. Bill and his wife own and operate the last Otis Grocery Store which is also the Post Office, the only Package Store in Otis and the meeting place for the whole town.

Bill was born in Springfield, the son of a prosperous florist. While Bill was still young, his father was persuaded to enter the real estate business on a small scale. He was so successful in the new enterprise that the florist concern was sold and Hall, Senior devoted himself to buying selling land and houses. Something unforeseen came, Mr. Hall could not meet certain obligations and was forced into bankruptcy. The family moved to Tolland, a Berkshire foothill town when Bill was about ten years old, expecting to return to the city "sometime soon." They never left Tolland and Bill has seen a Berkshire small townner ever since.

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Although not strictly a native of Berkshire, Bill Hall is representative of the younger men of Yankee stock who have something to say about the way Berkshire is “run.” In the earlier days Yankees formed the backbone of the county out with the coming of immigrant stock in the 18th century, their rule was seriously challenged and more often than not wrested from them. But some of the younger men of Yankee background have managed to hang on to the reins of power. To this group Bill Hall belongs.

Bill Hall was in his combination Grocery Store, Post Office and Package Store when I dropped in for a chat. I've known Bill for years, and since I used to live in Otis we had a good deal of gossiping to do. In the course of chatting about this and that, we happened on our youth, and I asked Bill about his school days.

“You didn't always go to school in the country did you, Bill?”

Bill settled in his old arm chair and stroking the black cat , began talking in his slow, almost dragging voice.

“Well, I was only a kid when the folks moved up to Tolland from Springfield. I'd had a few years in the Springfield Grammar School and I'll never forget how funny the country school was to me. Gosh, I didn't know what to make of only one teacher teaching all the kids in all different grades. The first day I went, the teacher told me I had to do certain chores. There weren't many boys in the school that year and we had to divy up the jobs of keeping the wood box filled, sweeping the floors, cleaning the blackboards and stuff like that. The one job no one wanted to do was the work of policing the outhouses. We hated that like anything. And do you know it was the first job the teacher gave me. Didn't hurt me none. Good for kids to have work to do, but was it a comedown for me? I was a city kid and thought I knew about everything though I wasn't over ten years old.

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“I was mad as the deuce and I guess I was fresh enough to talk back to the teacher and tell her so — only she was pretty. I guess most boys fall for a teacher sometime during their school years, but I started out young. I thought there was nobody like her. She was a beauty — all the young bucks in town were waiting on her hand and foot.

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I remember when summer vacation came, I was all upset because she was going to her home down near Boston, and I wouldn't see her until fall. I wasn't very good in school — as a rule — full of mischief and always ready to play hookey when I had a chance. Well sir, I was so blamed good with that teacher the folks thought I was going to be sick or die. She left after a year or two and I don't remember that my streak of goodness lasted very long. Boys sure are the limit.”

Bill looked reflective stroking the cat slowly. I began to think about a high school teacher I once had — but this wasn't getting me any material for my work.

“Say, Bill, I've often wondered how you happened to get started trapping like you do. The boys up town were telling me you made the best catches in town this year. You must be darn good.”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. It's all in the hang of it. I been trapping so long, I guess you just got to catch something once in a while.” Bill was plainly confused by the praise. “It was while I was still in school that I began trapping. Might never have started if a fox hadn't got my pet cat. Darn fox came right into the yards grabbed that cat and was off without a minute's wait. I was heart-broken. The cat was about the smartest animal I've seen — used to sleep on my bed nights and follow me around like a dog. We'll sir, after that fox killed my cat, I was ready to kill every fox I could find. I started out trapping — and I've been at it ever since. Of course trapping is just a side-line with me — never was anything else. It's a good business, but you have to have other things to turn to because there's too much uncertainty in it. I've done 3 a lot of different jobs in my time. I wasn't very old

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when my father died and I had to do my best to help support mother. They were running a wood turning shop down in New Boston — you know the old red mill down near Dominick Competti's. I went down there and got a job turning out handles for a hardware shop in Torrington. Mr. Deming the owner was a fine man to work for. He was a typical old-time Yankee, always experimenting and building queer contraptions. Give him a piece of steel, an old file maybe and he could turn out the slickest knife you ever saw. On another floor of the old mill they made barrel heads. They used almost any kind of wood for that stuff. I guess that was the last of Sandisfield's real industry. I worked there until the shop closed down and then did odd lumbering jobs.

“About 1913, after my brother had given me a banjo, I took a correspondence course and learned to play it. Then with Sammy Spring, the town's fiddler, we ran dances at the Otis Town Hall. We didn't make much money at first but we had grand time. I've played with Sammy, off and on, ever since. Every year during Exposition Week we play at the old barn at Stows Village at the Eastern States Exposition Grounds. I was with Sam when he played for Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Annual Scouts Rally, Hotel Statler Boston and at several other shindigs, sponsored by some of the leading people of the country.

“Music isn't the only thing I studied by correspondence. I once took a course of cartooning, just for the fun of it, from the Landon School. I've had a lot of fun doing cartoons, but nothing commercial.

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Later, I took a course of drawing from the International Correspondence School. That, too, was interesting; taught me a lot. No I've never done much with either of these courses, but I've had a lot of fun just licking some of those tough assignments. I suppose if I were to live in a good-sized city, I might go after some kind of an art job. But why should I, living here. Small town life is my meat. Folks, city folks, don't really live. They just exist. Every day of their lives is rush, rush, rush. Always in a hurry and going nowhere damned fast. Of course I'm particularly fortunate. The wife and I have a good business here and we're

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making money. Not a lot but enough to live on, real comfortably. And we don't have to rush around like city folks running a store. We have to work hard sometime, but our work isn't a continual grind. When we want to relax, we relax. City folk never really relax, don't know how.

“You know I admire folks with college degrees. It must be pretty nice to struggle through book after book to acquire a B.A., Ph.D. and all that. Now that class of folks are the real backbone of a nation. They're the thinkers and doers, they're the real brains of the universe, but some one else is always capitalizing on their knowledge. For instance, what would a big corporation do without the services of a big time lawyer, an expert accountant, a master of English to write their advertisements? But when you figure the income of these folks against the income of the big corporation, there's a lot of difference. After all we're all born to fill a certain niche in the scheme of things and happy is the man who finds his niche. Sounds like real philosophy, doesn't it?

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“Well, I've filled several niches.

“I guess the job I held the longest, fifteen years, was working for the Van Dusen's as a handy man. They're people with more money than they know what to do with. Mrs. Van Dusen is an heir to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune. Her first husband was a wealthy man, but she divorced him to marry E. K. Lincoln, the old time star of the silent movies. They have a big estate on Long Pond, one in New York, one at Palm Beach, one in California. Guess what they do for diversion? Raise chow dogs to exhibit. Now there's nothing real constructive in that kind of a life; but they think so. They keep a man on their Otis place year round to supervise. This fellow is my brother-in-law Harry. He really hasn't much to do, except look after the cows chows and see that no one gets on the property. For a time the Van Dusens had or thought they had exclusive use of Long Pond. Never allowed anyone on it. They owned three of the finest motor launches you ever saw and I can't remember one time they were ever used. We'd put them in the lake during the

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summer months and jack them up in the boat house in the fall. Some people knowing that these boats were never used , tried to buy them from the Van Dusens by bargaining, such as offering to paint the house, barns and shed, but there was nothing doing. A year or two ago, Harry, that's my brother-in-law, was ordered to take those boats out to the middle of Long Pond and sink them. Of course he did as he was told, and there they are to this day. It just goes to show you how little some big people can be.

“For years the Van Dusens had a monopoly on Long Pond. Any one who tried to go on it was ordered off by an armed guard. Well, everybody 6 around here got to hollering about it and so the State Department of Conservation, along with the town of Blandford cut a fifty-foot right of way from the North Blandford Road to the lake and gave the Van Dusens to understand that the lake was state property and open to use by the public. That move set those high hats back on their heels.

“The Van Dusens treated their help well enough, though. I never had to kick on that, but they were so eternally small. Well after Mrs. Van married E. K. Lincoln they made a couple of silent moving pictures on the property. “The Littlest Rebel,” was one, in fact the only title I can remember. The leading roles were played by Lincoln and a cast of New York ham actors. The crowd scenes and extra parts were played by the locals. While this all was going on the town folks went about the village with their make-up on. Some of the girls wouldn't take it off, because they thought it made them look better, I guess. The whole countryside was movie crazy. We all got the biggest kick out of watching Lincoln direct the scenes. One lady I guess it was the Snow boy, was to run on and tell the soldier that their quarters had been set afire. Every time he made his entrance he came on , his face wreathed in a silly smile and would say calmly, ‘Hey, Mr. your house has been set afire.’ I bet Lincoln worked with the kid for more than an hour to make him act really upset. Wasn't the youngster's fault. With all the townspeople watching, the kid naturally felt embarrassed. In the horse scenes where they'd show the cavalry on the gallop, that's where the extras has a lot of fun. They'd come on, a-tearing hell for leather.

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Don't forget Mr. country kids could ride horses in those days, bare-back or any other way. Getting paid four dollars a day for being a movie extra was darned easy money for the local kids. I don't believe the pictures made here amounted to much. I never heard anything about any of them except one was shown in Pittsfield. No one from the town went as I know of."

"What did you do after you left the Van Dusens, Bill?"

"Well, from the time when I was a boy in Tolland I trapped. I wasn't too successful and had to do a lot of experimenting to get anywhere. I read every game magazine I could lay my hands on, ads and all. You know most of those sporting magazines print articles by guys who think they're expert trappers. They lead you to believe that they're giving you the complete lowdown of their methods, but they always leave the most important, 'how-to-get-them-in-your-trap', out. I tried everything I read. Several times I sent ten or fifteen dollars away in answer to adds offering to tell you the secrets of trapping. It was good money thrown away. And the proper scents to use; why there are thousands advertised and only three that are any good. Well, it took me fifteen years to develop a technique that I consider one hundred percent perfect. Come downstairs, Jill show you the result of three week's trapping. Here's sixteen skins, ten reds and six greys. Here are several coons and muskrats. I guess that proves my technique works. In spite of this I don't consider myself an expert trapper. You know when a fellow gets to the point that he feels there is nothing new to learn, he's on the skids. Trapping to me is a hobby. I only set about 8 fifteen traps. Why there are some folks in this town, the Bartons in particular, that have trap lines the length and breadth of the county. Sam and his dad. Sam runs a garage during the summer, his father a boarding house and during trapping season they work the trap line. You know our trapping season is a short one. Last fall was a good season, didn't have any freeze-ups to amount to much and not much snow. Up in the North they can trap the year round because the snow is much drier. Here we're liable to get a sudden thaw

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followed by a just as sudden freeze and that ruins our season. For instance in trapping for fox the trap is set in a spring. Well, if we had a sudden freeze-up over night all your work is lost. Your set would freeze over. Now I'll show you the perfect set for fox. First you locate a spring near a brook or river. You wade up the watercourse to the spring. On one edge you set a flat stone firmly so it won't tip or give. Then about a foot from that stone you place your trap with a small round piece of turf on the trigger. Fox are like dogs, they like old rotted meat or carrion, but don't like to wet their feet. Now a certain distance from the partly submerged trap you put a rock upright and on that put your bait, just as if some bird had dropped it there. The bait can be rotted cat or wood chuck meat with the fat still on it, and on the fur side you put your scent.

“Mr. Fox trotting through the woods comes along sniffing and catches a scent of the bait. He comes near it and steps on the rock and then on the piece of turf covering the trigger of the trap and he's a goner. You've got him cold as a cucumber. And that's all there is to it.

“The way I'm going on you'll think all I do is trap. Of course I like trapping— and I get an awful kick out of catching some really good pelts but I'm really a store keeper. Ida does do a lot around the store. She's got a good head for business and she knows how a store ought to look. Smart / woman— Ida. ”

“I suppose business is rather dull these days with the roads so bad.”

“Well, it could be better but along in the middle of the afternoon it's always pretty quiet here. They'll start coming in / to get the mail in about an hour or so. Of course Otis isn't like it used to be around war time when there was real business in this town. I don't suppose Otis ever saw such business as it did during from 1916 / to 1920. Why there were seven sawmill outfits going night and day. The storekeeper up at the center told me he used to sell most a thousand bushels of grain every week to the lumberjacks. Saturday night the town was full of them — buying at the stores going to the Grange dances and just getting around. Everybody was cutting their timber and selling it at top prices. But all that's gone

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now and I don't think it'll ever come back. Course we get along fairly well. There's a few fair farms in the town and there's always road building and repairing to fall back on when times get [tought?], but we could do with a little prosperity.”

The first customer of the afternoon arrived— she was evidently buying for the week and was going to make a long process of it. Every article was examined, discussed and argued over before she agreed to buy. It was time for me to go.

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“As I said before there are a good many kinds of scents, literally thousands, of them on the market; and not over three worth a penny. Most of them are made of anise, a skunk scent and other things like that. I don't try to make any scents but send to Iowa for the kind I use

“Now that deer season is on, I have about ten fox pelts hanging up in the store. Deer hunters go for these like hot cakes; and those pelts are dirt cheap at five dollars each.

“You know if I were one of these out-of-town-lads that come up here for the deer season, I'd hate like hell to go back haze empty-handed. Most of these lads are pretty wise. If they don't get a deer, they at least take along a fox pelt. You know how most wives are. They hate like the dickens to see money spent without some return. In fact most women would much rather have a nice fox fur neck piece than a deer, anyways.

“It doesn't cost much to have one made up in a neck piece, about ten dollars or so. That includes the price of tanning, processing and the making up of it.

“I am going to give Ida, that's my wife, eight pelts so that she can have a nice cape made of them. They're to be made from the pelts of grey fox. They make up the classiest of all, and they look pretty ritzy. You know how women are — they always want the thing other women are wearing. Ida says fox capes are the latest thing in New York. Guess she'll have the latest right here in Otis all right.