

## ***Transcript of Radio Documentary: Edith Cutting***

The study of folklore in New York State hit a milestone in 1939 with the publication of Body, Boots and Britches. This collection of stories, songs, beliefs and practices was compiled by Dr. Harold Thompson from work that he and some of his students did. Lamar Bliss introduces us to one of his students.

### **Start of Documentary:**

Edith Cutting: “I had grown up with weather signs, I’d grown up with proverbs. I’d grown up with stories of the lumber woods; things of this sort were just a part of my life. But I had never thought of them identified as a particular study, a particular type of thing.”

Lamar Bliss: Edith Cutting comes from Essex County near Elizabethtown, NY. The farm she grew up on has been in the family since the early 1800s. In the 1930s, as a teenager, she left home to attend the Albany Normal School, a teachers’ college. There, it was a simple assignment for a college course on American Folklore, recalls Edith, that got her to look at her family and all the stories and traditions she’d grown up with, differently. Her professor, Dr. Harold Thompson, known as Dr. Tommy, asked his students to go home and collect stories and songs from family members.

Cutting: “So, when I went home at Christmas time, I spent the whole Christmas vacation writing down just as fast as I could everything that people were telling me. I had no recording machine at that time, but dad and mother had done their share of the work very well. They had talked with my grandparents, my great-uncles, the neighbors, anybody that they could think of and told them that I needed these things, and I would be there at Christmas time, and I would come see them.”

Bliss: The resulting paper earned her high marks from Dr. Tommy. He asked to use some of her research in his book Body, Boots and Britches and, a few years later, he encouraged Edith to publish her own study: Lore of an Adirondack County. Over the years she continued to mine the rich collection of ghost stories, home remedies, and sayings her family had.

Cutting: “There were things that were used as teaching devices. I was trying to remember the verse about planting corn. ‘One for the cutworm, one for the crow, one to rot and one to grow.’ So that even a child could help plant the corn, ‘cause it was a hand process. And that was perfectly true; you put more in the soil than you expected to come up. There was one about judging a horse: ‘One white foot, buy him. Two white feet, try him. Three white feet, deny him. Four white feet and a snip on his nose, take off his hide and feed him to the crows.’ Again, I don’t know how true that was. Theoretically, a white foot would have a softer hoof, so that it could be more easily damaged.”

Bliss: Her interest in folklore became a lifelong passion. After college, trips home always resulted in new stories and songs from relatives. And when she settled near

Binghamton and started teaching in Johnson City, her English classes gave Edith the opportunity to let her students try their hand at a similar project.

Cutting: “I think it is so important for youngsters to have a close family relationship, and I think folklore is one of the warmest and most delightful ways of encouraging that. To find out that their parents and grandparents knew stories and songs that probably they’d never even spoken of before, but they went back and talked with them and brought in stories, songs, verses, recipes, all kinds of things of that sort, that I think they would not have been aware of otherwise if it hadn’t been for that unit which started their thinking. And I think once they realize that history is a personal thing, that people have lived through these times and can tell them about them, if they ask, if they’re interested, I think it helps their understanding of history.”

Bliss: Edith Cutting, a pioneer collector of Adirondack folklore. Thanks to Traditional Arts of Upstate New York for use of interview material, and for the New York Folklore Society, I’m Lamar Bliss.