

John Parris Interview With Mary Scroggs
September of 1981

Manuscript: HL_MSS17-03_17_13_Parris_SoapMaking_1981-09

Transcribed by Katherine Nagy
For ENGL 659: Southern Literature
Instructor: Dr. Mae Miller Claxton
November 5, 2025

Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography was prepared by students in ENGL 659: Southern Literature. The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

- Demonstrate proficiency with research tools and relevant technology for this subject along with appropriate scholarly material
- Communicate scholarly information to a group of peers
- Develop an appreciation of the culture, history, and art of the region

All work is presented as submitted by the graduate students. While they take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are possible. As they learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires meticulous research and corroboration by authoritative sources. Our objective is to provide transcriptions and annotations of WCU's Special Collections materials that will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, patrons, and all users of our library's resources.

If you wish to submit an emendation or correction for this document, please email Dr. Mae Miller Claxton (mclaxton@wcu.edu)

Introduction to the Audio

John Alvis Parris Jr. (1914-1999) is known as one of Western North Carolina's most influential writers and cultural preservationists. Parris was born and raised in the Sylva area, and began his career as a journalist when he was a teenager. He served for a time as a journalist during World War II in Europe, though his interests remained in Appalachia. In 1955 Parris began his column *Roaming the Mountains* for the *Asheville Citizen Times*, which turned into multiple novels as well. This audio, lasting 11 minutes and 54 seconds, is one of Parris' recorded interviews with Mary "Mae" Scroggs (1896-1984), a local woman whom Parris had interviewed in the past about soap making and seems to have come to her residence for the purpose of another interview on soap making (*Newspapers by Ancestry*). There is not a corresponding news article that has been identified with this interview, though it is possible that the information from this interview ended up in a novel of Parris' or was used for one of his narrative pieces as research. At the time of this interview, Mary appears to have a broken hip, which inspires talk of other broken hips, and one of her daughters is staying with her during her recovery, most likely her daughter Blanche Smith.

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

While the audio quality for this interview is relatively good, there are certain portions of the interview where it is difficult to tell what is being said or who is saying what. Because of this, there are spots that have been labeled "unintelligible" or as having two people talking at once. It is recommended that the reader take a moment to listen to the corresponding audio to help with gaining an understanding rooted in context for these moments.

When finding information to provide context for many points throughout this interview, roadblocks appeared that made it difficult to locate information. One of those roadblocks was determining who the Moore family is that John Parris mentions in the beginning of this audio. The last name Moore was, and remains, a common surname in the region, making it difficult to determine who John Parris was actually referring to. Currently there is no conclusive evidence as to what family Parris was talking about, but if a reader comes across such information, please reach out to Dr. Mae Miller Claxton as previously stated.

Transcription

Mary Scroggs (MS) 00:01

Now you might pick out something out there that you...

John Parris (JP) 00:07

I, you know uh, it's uh I went over to Miss Moore called me this woman, Mrs. Hogsed, Sophie Hogsed¹, she's having a, she'll be 100 years old, Sunday. And I went to by the Moore's, and they would tell me how to get there. And I had dinner with them. Lunch. I used to know the Moores when they were out on the lake, you know.

MS 00:30

Yeah

JP 00:31

And I hadn't seen they've moved into town, build a place there now, just...

MS 00:34

They have.

JP 00:35

Just outside, just inside Hayesville². And uh so I went by to see and had lunch, and then went on to uh...

MS 00:45

unintelligible

JP 00:48

Well, my mother was uh went into hospital³ for some tests, and went down in the elevator to have lunch and coming back up, and she couldn't get off the elevator anytime the door came through and hit her, knocked her down. She broke her hip that way. School days. Yeah, no, you're he kept, he kept everything, didn't he⁴?

MS 01:21

Oh, well you just sort of go into his file case sometime when you have time, come on, go in.

JP 01:29

Well, I'd like, you know...

MS 01:32

I know you're rushed now.

JP 01:33

¹ Likely in reference to Sophia Deborah Hogsed, nee Tiger, born in 1881 in Tusquittee, Clay, NC.

² A nearby town in Clay County, NC.

³ Myrtle Evelyn Parris, nee Tallent, (1887-1969). She was most likely at Harris Regional in Sylva, NC as she lived in the Sylva area her entire life.

⁴ Likely in reference to Mary's late husband, Fred O. Scroggs (1891-1967).

To take a day to do what to go through this.

MS 01:35

Oh, yeah.

JP 01:36

Where do you live? Close by¹?

MS 01:40

She live down on Peachtree. She's just staying with me while I've got my hip broke. Now them songs last time was wrote when the Indians are still down here, I thought maybe you could use them in some of your writing². I...

JP 01:58

Right.

Background Noise 02:05

unintelligible

Mary Scrogg's Daughter (MS Daughter) 02:12

Why don't we just turn him loose in here Mom?

MS 02:15

Let him in.

JP 02:19

No uh, I uh it you know, this is the thing that you don't do quickly. And I'll...

MS 02:25

Well now...*unintelligible*

JP 02:28

All right, I'll come, I'll come by and spend a spend a day over here and go through this.

MS 02:32

You can go through Fred's³ got his file case in there.

MS Daughter 02:35

I'll go out here and let him see she's a dying for somebody to look at this.

JP 02:41

What files I've been in there. Last time I was here, you took me in there.

¹ Parris seems to be talking directory to Mary's daughter here, who is most likely Blanche Smith (1917-2009).

² Likely in reference to Fred Scrogg's work with the John C Campbell Folk School (*Newspapers by Ancestry*).

³ Mary's late husband, he was involved heavily with the John C Campbell Folk School and this is likely another reference to his work with the folk school.

MS 02:48

Yeah *unintelligible*

MS Daughter 02:52

You want him to take any of this with him?

JP 02:55

No, don't let me take any of the files now.

MS 02:58

Oh yeah.

JP 02:59

I'll just come back one day.

MS 03:00

Come back and look in his file cases.

JP 03:01

Right? Right. That'd be bad. *unintelligible*

MS 03:05

He's got two file cases in there, into history of Cherokee¹ and Clay², everything.

JP 03:11

When did when was the last time you made any soap³?

MS 03:15

It's been, I guess, six months. Yeah, I can make it.

JP 03:20

I know, you know you made me some one time.

MS 03:21

Yeah, I can make it all right, I've not forgot that. But you know, a broken hip you can't do...

JP 03:28

Right? When did you break your hip?

MS 03:33

¹ Likely the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, whose reservation lands are located roughly an hour away from Brasstown, NC, where MS lived, though it could also be referring to Cherokee County which bordered the county Brasstown is located in.

² Clay County, which a good portion of Brasstown is located in, as well as the John C Campbell Folk School and where Mary lived.

³ Parris had done previous interviews with Mary on soap making (*Newspapers by Ancestry*).

The 21st day of August. I've been out yonder and had operation everything. Yep, they kept me at Waynesville¹. They couldn't operate on me down here. And they said... here *unintelligible*

JP 03:46

Well you. Can you uh.

MS 03:47

here *unintelligible*

JP 03:48

Yeah? See, I know that's what put a pin in.

MS 03:52

Yeah.

JP 03:53

That's my, my grandfather² was 92 and he broke his hip. They said he'd never walk again. He did.

MS 03:59

He did.

JP 04:01

Yeah he lived to be 99 years old.

Background Noise 04:02

unintelligible

MS Daughter 04:03

You're doing real good.

JP 04:04

Yeah, he didn't, Grandpa, the thing that scared him was crutches. You know, we tried to get him, you know, to walk. He was in a wheelchair.

MS 04:13

And back in that day they didn't have the equipment to have.

JP 04:16

No they sure don't. And uh one night he got so we finally got him to use crutches. And one night, I was down at the house and, and uh there's a hallway going through mother's house and kitchen and dining room and two bedrooms on that side out of the living room. So she said, supper ready tell your grandpa. So I called him, and I went through the she called, said, supper ready, Papa. I went through the dining room to be sure. You know, he was going down the hallway, and he's holding up his crutches, walking

¹ Mary was more than likely at Haywood Regional Medical Center, as the old hospital closed in 1979 (Ross).

² Likely in reference to his maternal grandfather, William Riley Tallent (1859-1957), not his paternal grandfather, Rufus Milton Parris (1842-1926).

without 'em, you know. And I thought, boy, that's all he needs to drop it, you know, break that *unintelligible* but I did. And then he uh then he used crutches about three months, and uh then he started using his cane. Didn't use crutches, and he'd walk uptown.

MS 05:12

I'm gonna get me some crutches. I believe I could mulch now.

JP 05:15

That's mmhmm. Now-

MS Daughter 05:16

Tell him that your courting days. She's been telling me...

JP 05:20

I want to uh... let me ask you this, how do you make your soap? I want to do.

MS 05:26

Well, I take um a can of lye and 'bout three or four pounds of water, grease or some kind. And I just stirred in that cold. I don't boil it.

JP 05:40

You don't boil it, stir it in cold well, and you stir that, lye in, just you wet it.

MS 05:49

Kind of you might say, put water in and get it mixed up. Mixed up to 'bout, as much as you know you're gonna make.

JP 05:57

All right. And then what do you do after you get it stirred up?

MS 06:02

Well, I um pour it out into something cut it off and *unintelligible*

JP 06:06

You don't use any heat at all?

MS 06:11

No. I used to, I did, but I don't anymore. It makes it easy. You can take your lard, melt it, or whatever kind of grease you're going to use, melt that lye and...

Multiple People Talking At Once 06:25

unintelligible

MS 06:29

Then stir it in there... *unintelligible*

JP 06:30

It's a lot cheaper to make your soap than to buy it innit?

MS 06:35

Oh yes.

JP 06:36

There's a lot of people now coming back to the old days of making the soap.

MS 06:39

Yes. Yeah, they're coming back.

MS Daughter 06:41

Mama, tell him exactly the uh the amounts that you use, like you told me.

MS 06:48

I use um uh half a gallon of water to that can of lye, and the amount of grease have gotten. Just stir it all, how...

JP and MS Daughter 06:55

How much? How much grease? How much grease do you use?

MS 06:57

Well you take uh, oh I don't know. I have never weighed it or measured it but about half a gallon.

JP 07:04

Half a gallon of grease.

MS 07:05

Yeah, mmhmm.

JP 07:07

And uh where do you get your grease now?

MS 07:10

Well, I get it from bacon¹.

JP 07:13

And save it. You save it up.

MS 07:16

The salt don't seem to hurt it.

JP 07:21

People don't kill hogs like they used to.

¹ Lots of people will take the leftover grease from a pan of bacon to save, such as what Mary is referring to here.

MS 07:23

Oh, no, no. Goes to the market.

JP 07:26

Mmhmm.

MS 07:27

Yeah, yeah. If I could just work, I'd make you some soap *unintelligible*

JP 07:33

How old are you now?

MS 07:36

85. I was 85 the seventh day of August.

JP 07:41

Uh, now there's uh, they used to in the old days they made what was called soft soap¹, didn't?

MS 07:47

Yeah, my mother² made that. *unintelligible*

JP 07:53

Now that you boil that didn't you?

MS 07:55

Yeah, yeah. She had to boil it. And it never did get hard to where they cut off³. But she always had barrels, *unintelligible*

JP 08:03

And they call that soft, you know about soft soap, soft soap and then hard soap.

MS 08:07

Yeah, yeah.

MS Daughter 08:09

Tell him how you done that, Mama.

¹ Soft soap was made extremely similar to hard soap, but with a different type of lye. There are two kinds of lye- sodium hydroxide (NaOH) and potassium hydroxide (KOH)- and the kind of lye used to make soap will change what kind of soap is produced (Dominick & John). Mary's mother would have used potassium hydroxide to make soap because of her use of wood ash. All lye made from wood ash is potassium hydroxide because there is a great deal more potassium than sodium in wood ash, meaning all soap made from wood ash is soft soap ("Making Lye From Wood Ash").

² Mary's mother, Nora V. Arrant nee Green (1867-1943).

³ The terms hard soap and soft soap apply to the actual physicality of the soaps, meaning that soft soap is genuinely softer and might not have reached the level of hardness that was needed to cut it into bars or similar. This is likely why Mary's mom had barrels of the soap, as no matter how long she let it cool for if it was a very soft soap it would have never been solid enough to be out of a container like that (Helmenstine).

MS 08:11

Well, I mean, they just run down the lye from the ash hopper¹, he knows what the ash hopper's like. And they run the, Mama'd take a day to run the lye down. She'd put her water in the ash hopper², let it drain it'd really be strong lye, because Daddy³ burnt hickory wood⁴.

JP 08:31

That's right.

MS 08:32

And we had strong lye, yeah.

JP 08:34

Was that when you were living up on the creek?

MS 08:37

Yeah. Living over here?

JP 08:39

Yeah.

MS 08:40

Yeah, we lived over down church, east side.

JP 08:42

Yeah.

MS 08:43

Several years.

JP 08:44

What was that creek's? What was the place where you lived?

MS 08:47

It's the folk school now⁵...

MS Daughter 08:50

What was the name creek where you lived Mama?

¹ An ash hopper would be used to separate lye from wood ash (National Park Service).

² Water is poured over the wood ash in an ash hopper to create lye (McKillop).

³ Mary's father, James Franklin Arrant (1867-1943).

⁴ When making lye with wood ash it is important to use ash from hard wood and not soft wood (McKillop). Hard woods include those like oak, ash, birch, or hickory such as Mary mentioned (though there are more) that come from angiosperm trees (flowering) and not gymnosperm trees (mostly conifer, meaning they produce seeds in cones instead of flowers) which are soft wood ("Hardwood and Softwood Species". Using a good hard wood is why Mary's mother's lye was good.

⁵ Likely referring to the John C Campbell Folk School.

JP 08:54

What was that called?

MS 08:55

Well it's Brasstown.

JP 08:56

Yeah, what uh? Well, now your father.

MS Daughter 09:02

unintelligible may.

MS 09:03

Papa lived up there, he owned a good place up there.

MS Daughter 09:05

unintelligible the tear him the good police right now.

JP 09:06

Well, where was that? Where was that school where the boy stole the bell?

MS 09:11

That was up here.

JP 09:13

All right, you told me.

MS 09:15

unintelligible

MS Daughter 09:17

Alright, well, tell about it. That's...

JP 09:18

I-I-I've written about that¹.

MS 09:21

Yeah.

JP 09:22

Uh, on you're uh on the uh how much does, how much does lye, a can of lye cost now?

MS 09:32

About 15 cents.

¹ While Parris states this, no corresponding article has been found in regards to what school or story of a stolen bell they are referencing here.

JP 09:36

And uhh so how much? How long does? How long does a pan of soap last you?

MS 09:43

Oh, it'd last you a long time.

MS Daughter 09:47

What's a long time Mama?

MS 09:49

unintelligible I've got a moisture, you know.

MS Daughter 09:52

What's a long time. How long would it last you?

MS 09:55

Oh, it lasted me a month.

JP 09:59

A whole pan? It...

MS 09:55

Yeah.

JP 10:02

I think it'd last you long in that, wouldn't it?

MS 10:04

Well, it would, I guess I just haven't counted.

JP 10:08

Right.

MS 10:10

unintelligible But sometime when you have time, you come here and go over for those.

JP 10:16

Okay, I will.

MS and MS Daughter at the same time 10:17

Now he's got... sing your song... *unintelligible*

MS Daughter 10:22

Now, why don't you sing him that song, Mama?

MS 10:27

Them old timey songs was written before the Civil War. Most of them.

MS Daughter 10:33

Okay.

MS 10:34

I began collecting them when I was just a strip of a girl.

MS Daughter 10:38

Okay, which one do you want to sing? Do you want to sing the Black Sheep¹ or Barbara Allen²?

MS 10:33

Well I don't either one of 'em by heart.

MS Daughter 10:46

Yes, Ma'am, you do.

MS 10:48

I don't know which one *unintelligible*

MS Daughter 10:50

Well.

JP 10:52

Uh, I'll, I'll let her sing to me again, because uh I, I've got to get back across the mountain before the clouds come down again. It's...

MS 11:00

And it snows. *laughs*

JP 11:02

Uh... I'll come back. I'll get back over here within the next week or so.

MS 11:07

Well if you can, if you can't let me know.

JP 11:10

I will, all right, I will. I've got your you're in the telephone director.

MS 11:12

Yeah.

¹ Likely referring to the folk song "Black Sheep, Black Sheep" which has many versions from over the years and has been labeled as an Appalachian lullaby (Keefer; "Black Sheep, Black Sheep (Appalachian Lullaby)").

² Likely referring to the Irish folk ballad "Barbara Allen" (also referred to by other similar titles over the years such as "Barby Allen") which has been shared around other Appalachian families (Glaze; Keefer).

JP 11:14

I've got *unintelligible*

MS 11:15

Well... yeah.

JP 11:16

And I'll uh...

MS 11:18

If you want to you can go through *unintelligible*. You can get your things to ride on now.

JP 11:22

Okay, well you take care of yourself now.

MS 11:25

Thank you.

JP 11:26

And I'll see you. Okay.

MS Daughter 11:27

Take care.

JP 11:31

Well it's gonna rain again tonight.

Background Noise 11:34

unintelligible

Background Noise 11:39

door opening, walking, car sounds

Annotated Works Cited

Ancestry Library Edition. Ancestry.com

Ancestry was used to gather most of the information on family, dates, places of residence, and other information.

“Black Sheep, Black Sheep (Appalachian Lullaby).” *NewTunings*,
<http://www.newtunings.com/kidmid/blacksheep.html>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Breedlove, Nick. “Holden Looks Back On Sylva’s First Hospital, Nursing Career.” *The Sylva Herald*, 8 Jul. 2015, https://www.thesylvaherald.com/news/article_0c1d66be-24d3-11e5-ad7c-e3c9ad4c77cd.html, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Breedlove’s article was useful for finding information about the history of hospital access in Sylva to determine what hospital Parris’ mother would have been in an elevator at.

Dominick & John. “‘The Tortoise & The Hare’ - A Tale of Hard vs. Soft Shaving Soaps.” *Sir Henry’s Sundries*, 7 Jul. 2017, <https://www.sirhenrysundries.com/blog/the-tortoise-the-hare-a-tale-of-hard-vs-soft-shaving-soaps/>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Glaze, Susie. “The ‘Barbara Allen’ From Its Irish Source.” *FolkWorks*, 1 Mar. 2024,
<https://folkworks.org/blog/the-barbara-allen-from-its-irish-source/>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

“Hardwood and Softwood Species.” *The Engineering Toolbox*, 2018,
https://www.engineeringtoolbox.com/hardwood-softwood-species-d_2148.html, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Helmenstine, Anne Marie. “How Saponification Makes Soap.” *ThoughtCo*, 2 Aug. 2018,
<https://www.thoughtco.com/how-saponification-makes-soap-606153>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Keefer, Jane. “Folk Music Index: Bank to Barb.” *Folk Music- An Index to Recorded and Print Resources*, Ibiblio, 13 Nov. 2013, <https://www.ibiblio.org/keefe/b03.htm#Baral>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Keefer, Jane. “Folk Music Index: Bis to Black.” *Folk Music- An Index to Recorded and Print Resources*, Ibiblio, 14 Nov. 2013, <https://www.ibiblio.org/keefe/b08.htm>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

“Laundress: Making Soap.” *National Park Service*, 18 Jul. 2022,
<https://www.nps.gov/fosc/learn/education/laundress7.htm>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

The National Park Service’s information on making soap was useful for determining the purpose and makeup of an ash hopper.

“Making Lye From Wood Ash.” *Journey To Forever*, https://journeytoforever.org/biodiesel_ashlye.html, Accessed 5 November 2025.

McKillop, Wendy. “Making Lye With An Ash Hopper.” *Santa Cruz Mountain Bulletin*, 2 Apr. 2021,
<https://www.santacruzmountainbulletin.net/making-lye-with-an-ash-hopper/>, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Newspapers by Ancestry. Newspapers.com

Newspapers was used to gather information that Ancestry was lacking, such as detailed obituary information.

Ross, Kathy N. "Before the Old Hospital, There Was... The Old Hospital." *The Mountaineer*, 8 Jun. 2021, https://www.themountaineer.com/news/haywood_history/before-the-old-hospital-there-was-the-old-hospital/article_434beb1c-c47b-11eb-95fb-67c0dd261678.html, Accessed 5 November 2025.

Ross' discussion of the history of the hospitals in Waynesville was helpful in figuring out what hospital Mary was referencing when she discussed having to go to the hospital.