

The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress presents



Traditional music and dance "homegrown" in communities across the United States

## AN ACQUISITIONS AND PRESENTATION PROJECT

# MARGARET MACARTHUR

## VOICE AND DULCIMER TRADITIONAL MUSIC FROM VERMONT



Photo by Robert Corwin

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC



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**June 21, 2005**  
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# MARGARET MACARTHUR

Throughout her first months on this earth, young Margaret was sung nursery rhymes by her mother with the result that she sang before she could talk. Throughout her early years, as she moved with her family- from Arizona to the Midwest to Missouri and California, she was drawn to the places where there was a lot of music.

Margaret met and married John MacArthur at the University of Chicago and the next move was to Vermont where John was to teach at Marlboro College. Margaret was somewhat hesitant about settling in Vermont and to help her come to terms with the move, she acquired two books of Vermont songs: Edith Sturgis' Songs from the Hills of Vermont, and Helen Hartness Flanders' Country Songs of Vermont. She began to learn the songs. For her this was key to setting down roots and understanding place.

During their first years in Vermont they found a rundown farm in Marlboro. The price was right and they threw themselves into making it livable for their growing family. While John and Margaret worked endlessly on the farm they had purchased, she also began seeking out the traditional music of the area. She had a passion for the old ballads and she became a collector of old songs, searching out their tunes, finding older singers who could teach her. One of her greatest triumphs was locating Fred Atwood, a Vermont mountaineer in his 80s, whose father had sung for Edith Sturgis. Fred sang close to a hundred songs for Margaret.

Margaret was also introduced to Helen Hartness Flanders, Vermont's best known ballad collector during the '40s, '50s and '60s. With a shared interest in the traditional ballad, they met frequently. At Mrs. Flanders' death, Margaret was given a collection of her tapes by the Flanders family. From these she learned a number of other ballads.

In the '60s Margaret's parents moved to western Kentucky, not too far from where they had lived long ago in Missouri. When Margaret was home one summer, visiting her mother, she began collecting songs there and met Florence Fowler from Nortonville. She had learned most of her songs from her father who had died when she was 11, and sang them unaccompanied. They knew each other for twenty years, and every time Margaret saw her, Florence would sing her some new songs. Margaret speaks of her as both a great friend and a great influence on her:

Margaret is different from a traditional singer of old. She is a product of America's mobile society. Her father was a forester; who moved with the job. She was drawn to singing and music, and particularly the traditional ballad, but she sampled many traditions and styles. Still, it was the ballad that she was drawn to and once she settled and put roots down in Vermont, she learned the songs of the place— just as anyone else would who had grown up in the tradition— from the original sources. But over the years Margaret has done far more than preserve songs- she has rescued them, recorded them, and sung them, captivating others with this music, stimulating them to both sing and play the songs. Not least of whom are her own children- three often accompany her today with fiddle, guitar and voice. Whenever the MacArthurs

celebrate, when they are having fun, they sing and play music together: Many of her children and grandchildren still live on the farm and as Margaret says, "I think the glue of the family has been work on the place. And singing has been the fun."

Music and song serve as the underpinnings of Margaret's world. Those places that hold the most meaning for Margaret are those where she remembers singing taking place- informally, as entertainment, bringing sunlight into her world. Music nourished her; drove her; buoyed her, and anchored her. It is natural that music is so much a part of her family life.

Margaret's dedication and devotion to the lyrical ballad has led to her role as a seminal figure in Vermont's traditional music scene. She has participated as collector; as teacher; and as performer at family gatherings, coffee houses, community events, and festivals, both small and large. Over the years the recognition has snowballed- from the nation's capital, a performance at the Kennedy Center; from the New England Arts Biennial of the University of Massachusetts, "A New England Living Art Treasure" award in 1985; and in 2002, the Vermont Arts Council gave her a lifetime achievement award. While deeply gratifying to her personally, these testaments truly are the result of her deep-seated, unselfconscious passion for the music itself and her extraordinary ability as a performer:

Jane Beck  
Executive Director  
Vermont Folklife Center

Jane Beck received her PhD in Folklore in 1969 from the University of Pennsylvania and has served as the founding director of the Vermont Folklife Center since 1984. The Vermont Folklife Center is a cultural heritage organization which is dedicated to preserving and presenting the folk arts and traditions of Vermont and the surrounding region. The Center employs the oral interview as its major research tool and maintains an archive of 4000 taped interviews. Through ongoing field research the Center documents and conserves cultural heritage through exhibit, media, publications and educational projects, bringing recognition to the skills, talents and traditions of Vermonters, past and present. Through work for the Vermont Folklife Center, Beck has been involved in curating over twenty exhibitions, producing a number of publications and several radio series. Among those, one of the most memorable was Journey's End: The Traditions of Daisy Turner and her Family, which won the prestigious Peabody Award.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

