

**John Jacob Niles Reminiscences Concerning Doris Ulmann, December 22, 1957**  
**Transcript**  
**University Archives Sound Recordings Collection (UA 180)**  
**Sound Reels 268-269**

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Sound Reel 268

This is John Jacob Niles dedicating what we might call the preface to the story of Doris Ulmann.

Doris Ulmann stood about five feet four and half inches tall and weighed about a hundred and five pounds. This would seem to be a very small weight for one of that height but Miss Ulmann had suffered from a stomach difficulty most of her life and ate very sparingly. As a girl in her teens she began to develop certain digestive difficulties, which I was told and I understood by a rumor was a family failing. Her mother before her had the same trouble. Miss Ulmann was able to get a proper diet when she was home, but as she was away from home in the South with me quite a good deal she was exposed to what we humorously called the Forest Cooking in North America. In the small towns and the small hotels and the small restaurants of the central South one did not find a very exciting menu and one found poorly cooked food of any kind, even if it was not a part of your diet or no.

[00:01:50]

I remember the difficulties I used to have supplying Miss Ulmann with the right kind of soup. She loved black bean soup, which I, by the way, introduced into her house. There was a little delicatessen, a Jewish delicatessen store, in the 80s not far from 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. I used to go there and buy the black beans. I taught her cooks how to prepare them. And we served the soup, of course, with a slice of lemon and a slice of hard-boiled egg. Macy's carried those beans in those days too. But somehow it always seemed to fall to my lot to go over on 80, I think it was 88<sup>th</sup> or 89<sup>th</sup> Street near 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, to pick up the black beans. She loved stewed fruits, could never eat raw fruit. She ate very little coarse bread. I believe if I had to had time I might have introduced her to the kind of cereal we use in the South, but being a person with a bitter sense of humor all cereal was very childish to her. She drank an enormous quantity of coffee and practically no alcohol whatever.

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She depended upon her servants enormously. She had two cooks in the house who doubled in brass as serving maids and clean up women. One of them was a first-rate cook, and the other was only an amateur. She had a German chauffer who was also a handyman. He was the kind of chauffer who drove much too fast and dominated the high road wherever he was. He got into all kinds of difficulties with other drivers, bawling and baying at them in German when they wouldn't get out of his way. He was, however, extraordinarily accurate with an automobile and could drive through some of the most perilous situations. In his early days, he had been a chauffer to a German general, had been out on the Russian front in the first World War and had had first class experience with perilous driving. This talent served him in good stead when he was with us in the South.

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She had, I mean Miss Ulmann, had a dressmaker who was quite a good designer. Her clothes were fabulously beautiful. She even managed to wear beautiful hats. She had a consultant, let us say, at the New York store of Fortnum & Mason who advised her on suit coats, tweed items, etcetera. And she went to a man I think at Best's or perhaps at the uptown store there near St. Patrick's Cathedral on the right-hand side of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue coming uptown. She went there to an expert who advised her on her shoes. Miss Ulmann looked as if she had stepped out of the pages of one of the style magazines.

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She never slept very much. She stayed awake much of the night working with her photographic enterprises. I remember many times walking into the Sunday night performances of these so-called diseurs and female imitators. They didn't imitate the female, they were females who did imitations of other things. I can't think of the names exactly this moment, but they did readings and the like and, as I look back on it, I realize it was a terribly tiresome thing. But we used to go, I suppose, because it was the thing to do. And as we walked in the theater, the wise guys and the smart Alecs would say, "There goes Doris Ulmann and there goes Johns Jacob Niles. She has him handy to pick her up in case she falls down." She did fall down, because she was fatigued and weary and not very steady on her feet. And I did pick her up. I carried her over streams of water and I carried her over muddy places. I picked up her belongings when she dropped them on the floor in the theater or the concert hall. I picked them up when she dropped them in the railroad stations and on the street. She fell once on Park Avenue about nineteen hundred and twenty-six or -seven and broke her kneecap and had to lie in the hospital a considerable amount of time recovering. This colored her entire life afterward because she walked sometimes, on occasion, she was required to walk very heavily on a cane and the cane certainly did not become her.

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She wore floor length dresses almost entirely, and her summer dresses particularly were very attractive to the women in the South. They would finger the materials and admire her the way they were cut and sewed and put together. And she'd say—oh, yes, it was Saks, the store where she got her shoes—she'd say, "Oh, well, when I go back to town..." town was always New York City, of course, "...when I go back to town I will go up to Saks and, or go down to Saks, and have them send you a copy of it if you like." These mountain women didn't quite know what she was talking about. But oftentimes, after she learned some of their lingo, she would say—they would admire her dress, and she would say, "Oh, you must wear it sometime." And that pleased them enormously. She had, I remember, the summer of nineteen hundred and thirty-three, these magnificent, dotted, Swiss dresses. Very, very, full beautiful things. She had one, she had to have a new one, of course, every day because they were spoiled and covered with mud and dirt from our wandering around on back roads. The cleaners in the towns where we landed and the laundry people did a land office business with Miss Ulmann.

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She had a great overgrown Lincoln with a cloth top. It contained seats enough for about eight people. I suppose you could get seven or eight people into it by putting up the little seats in the back. And it had an enormous baggage compartment on the back. This Lincoln was what we used when we were in the

field in the South. The chauffer drove it exclusively. I never touched it. Then I had my own car which was a Chevrolet and it went into places where a mule would hardly be caught. I remember once I started across a bridge and I felt the bridge creaking under me and backed back just in time. The bridge folded up and fell down into the stream. A mule would have better sense than to do that. He would look at the bridge and realize it was unsafe. George the chauffer, the chauffer was named George Uebler, usually remained in one of the larger cities, cooling his heels, eating three meals a day, and being a great gentleman. And I did the driving to the remote places where we did our photography and I did my folklore recording. When I say recording, I mean writing down. I never had any mechanical devices of any kind, any electronic machinery to record my music.

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So, Miss Ulmann depended upon us all in every field except in her photography. If I ever assisted her she stood over me and, I mean stood over me, she watched everything I did and told me forty times how to do the simplest enterprises. How to pick the glass plates up and how to put them in the frame to dry. She mixed all the chemicals, never permitted me to have any control whatever of any of the chemical processes of either developing or fixing. I think she did let me make prints, yes, she did occasionally. But I got weary of the enterprise about midnight and I'd say, "Well, this is all." And I'd move on. And she continued to working until the early hours of the morning. In the theater, oftentimes, and at the parties we went to, her head would nod, she would be sleepy and I'd nudge her and wake her up and she'd say, "You swine, why don't you let me take a nap. I didn't get but two hours sleep last night or one hour sleep." I said, "Well, who's fault was that?" "Oh," she'd say, "well, that was art." And we would have a laugh over whether photography was art. And she'd denounce me because she felt that I didn't do enough art for art's sake.

This was, of course, was all in the very best nature kind of bantering. She enjoyed bantering me and I think that's one reason why she put up with me because she could tease me and I understood that it was teasing. She had a very bitter sense of humor and had absolutely no understanding of stupidity. She dealt with people who were not overly smart, I mean not overly informed in the ways of the world. They were the grist to her mill in the photographic line, but they had native intelligence understand. The others she simply checked off.

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I remember once upon a time she turned to me and she said, "That person is just about as stupid as the average president of the average small-town college in the average place in the South." Well, I had my laugh over it, of course, because I knew these people too. They were, these college presidents, were these hard-working, underpaid, in many cases, diligent fellows who hadn't had a great opportunity in the outside world. Doris had all these opportunities and had long since forgotten that they had cost her people a tremendous fortune in her education.

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She traveled abroad extensively in her early days with her father, her mother having died. She spoke German fluently, French fluently, Italian very well. Her English was flawless. I used to tease her occasionally about having a Brooklyn accent. This was a sore point. She said whenever I got to the point on being able to decide on her accent I had better pull mine together first. I sounded like a Southern

politician making a pitch for a few votes. I suppose I did in those days. I believe I have forgotten a lot of that kind of speech since then.

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Miss Ulmann's point of view about the people she photographed was quite simple. She concluded that there would always be someone with a snapshot camera to photograph pretty girls with frilled dresses and curled hair and made-up eyes and lips. She was concerned not with these people but with people who were just genuine, downright individuals. You had to be an individual, a character more or less, before she was interested in you even just a little bit.

She photographed a great many doctors. She photographed a great many scientists. She photographed musicians and actors. She photographed me extensively, but she felt that all of us, well, she felt that we had some quality that could be almost called genuine. And she didn't see us as dressed up people with pressed pants and a well-tied necktie at all. She saw beyond that to the person who was doing some thinking.

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Of course, I think she loved most the white mountaineers, the old patriarch types, the old women, even the young ones and the little children, but particularly the old ones. She saw in their faces the care and the trouble and the awful effort they had made to carry on a life now that they had reached the afternoon, the evening, of their days. She felt that it was her job to get a good clear impression of it on one of her plates.

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She would philosophize with these men and I wrote down the results of these philosophizings. I had a good deal of it. A lot of it will appear in my ballad book. These men, the older they were the more they were given to admiring her enormously and making up to her mildly. She was amused at the drunks who came up to her oftentimes and called her honey and sugar-foot. She would photograph them quickly before they got away. They were relaxed so their faces told a tremendous story.

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She was willing to put up with any kind of weather, any kind of heat, any kind of rain, any kind of discomfort, poor beds, and, as I said before, poor foods, for the sake of getting to some odd, out-of-the-way, almost god-forsaken spot where some ancient philosopher with a long white beard and a shock of white hair was sitting in front of his little cabin. They seemed to be waiting for her. The old women at the spinning wheels. The younger women sitting at the looms and the children carding wool. The children pulling weeds in tobacco beds. The children gathering up vines, the lower leaves of the tobacco in the tobacco fields, after the cutters had passed over and tying them up with little strings. All these things fascinated her enormously. These were the people, the people she really wanted to get down on paper for posterity.

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She thought of course that they were disappearing, that they would finally disappear and that there would be no more of them. I have lived to see that there was a mistake in this procedure, in this kind of

thinking, because I find now, twenty years after her death, I find that men are developing exactly as they did in nineteen-hundred and thirty. They are turning out to be the same kind of old, white haired boys, with the shock of white hair, even though they do listen to the radio on occasion and see television, they're not much different from their fabulous grandfathers.

[00:19:06]

No ever shot at us. No one ever went to the slightest trouble to make us any difficulty. We went into places where other people seldom went. The Fewgoods and their stir-off I never will forget. They had this considerable collection of men, more men than I thought they needed for a simple stir-off. I say stir-off, I mean they were making sorghum and the stirring off is the stirring off of the scum on the top of the pot until they finally get down to the clear, syrupy residue that has been boiled down from the sorghum juice, the juice of the sorghum plant, which unless you know I can tell you looks a little bit like a stalk of corn, a little shorter than the average stalk of corn.

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During the process of recording these people, I mean photographing them, Miss Ulmann had some difficulty. She called me over, she said, "Come over here, Johnny, I want you to look at something." She said, "There is a flash of lightning on this plate and I can't detect what it's coming from. I'm not pointed at the sun. No one has a piece of mirror." That's a trick children and wise guys will oftentimes pull off on you. They'll get a little piece of a mirror and flash light at you while you're trying to photograph. It's a dreadful thing because, of course, it spoils your plates. "No one was flashing any sunlight at us." And I looked through the ground glass and I went over in the direction of this light and I discovered it was a stack of rifles. Some of the rifles had been used a long while and the gun metaling on them had worn down to the point where they reflected sunlight. I said, "Now, Doris, there is a pile of rifles over there. That's what's giving us our flash of light." "Well," she said, "let's look into that." And she spoke to one of the boys, and the boys, without cracking a smile, said, "Miss, a gun rifle is a powerful handy thing to have handy sometime. It's a powerful, useful device. You simply can't go around all the time without having a good, straight shooting gun rifle handy and particularly in this community when you're doing a stir-off and a sorghum squeezing and we is today." We said, "Okay boys." "Now," they said, "we could rub a little mud on them rifles but we oughtn't to do it because it might make 'em work slow." Miss Ulmann said, "Okay, boys, that would be alright." And she moved the camera enough to get away from the flashing of the sunlight.

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It was during the recording, the photographing, of the Fewgoods that I took down some very interesting folklore material, a song that was not actually sung but a song that was recited by a member of the Fewgood family. And little Donny Fewgood did sing one of the songs. It was a tremendous opportunity for a city woman, a city-bred woman like Doris, to come into these tremendously isolated backwoods places and see the actual highlanders at work and play. See them up close in their houses. Sit with them, talk with them. Hear them express their fabulous philosophies and, finally, photograph them. Of course, I took down a great deal of the things they said and tried to take down the music they would sing.

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I remember once we were in the vicinity of Hyden, Kentucky and we were trying to get across Cutshine Creek. Cutshine is a way of saying cut shin. A man falling in this rocky creek one time cut his shin and it got to be called Cut Shin and, finally, Cutshine. The creek was wide and shallow, rocky. We wanted to get across. I picked Doris up on my back and piggy-backed her across the creek. I didn't get more than halfway across and she said, "Let's go back, go back to the other side." We set up the camera. There was a boy handy. She gave him instructions on just exactly how to lift off the lens cap—she never used a shutter—how to lift off the lens cap, how long to count, and how to put it back. She said, "We're going to get a photograph of this operation." You see, she had such a tremendous sense of the theater, she knew drama when she saw it coming. So, I picked her up again, started across the creek a second time, and in the middle of it I stopped. And she said, "Okay, little boy, take off the lens cap." And he did, and he put it back and I went on, deposited her on the other side, and went back and picked up the camera, put in a new plate, covered it up with the black cloth and brought it across to her. That picture was developed and it turned out to be a very delightful thing, Doris riding on my back across Cutshine Creek.

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I did not get a photograph of the time I carried her across a muddy ditch in my arms. That was not very far from the Pine Mountain School. We were photographing a magnificent old man who had his own coal mine and mined his own coal. And out of the mine, carried it directly from the mine into his fireplace. I was very anxious to have her photograph this old boy and he lived on the other side of this very muddy, sloppy looking ditch. It was partly full of coal slag and dirty and messy to the nth degree but nothing daunted her, she had to cross it and I carried her across, spoiling some of my clothes, of course. That was a very small matter. Whenever I spoiled any of my clothes, a new collection of clothes appeared almost as if by magic in the next mail and she took the old clothes away from me and gave them to one of the local boys. She gave out clothes all the way up and down the country, particularly her own clothes.

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Once upon a time, in Gatlinburg, Kentucky, we had gone up the side of a hill to photograph a bee man and the bloomin' bees had bit me in the top of the head. That's how the bees bite you, at least that's how they bit me. They bit me in the top of the head a half a dozen times and, finally, they tried to bite her and she had so much hair and had a hat on and they couldn't get through that, of course.

Finally, we got the photographs and started back. We were both riding on horses. Doris had procured a delightful, rather impractical pair of jodhpurs from her modise in New York City. And there she was riding down like the Queen of Sheba, very quietly. And I was riding following behind her. I had on my riding equipment too. I had on a very fancy pair of army-made jodhpurs and I was loaded down with a camera and a lens box and a couple of tripods. At one place along the line—I don't know how it happened, I'm supposed to be a horseman and Doris was a hopeless city-bred girl who had been on a horse very few times in her life and she was getting along beautifully—but my horse apparently either stepped too far to the right and his hind leg on the right-hand side went down. It may have been a soft spot in the path. The path was very narrow. And then, before I knew it, his entire hind quarters were down and he was wedged between a tree and a side of the ravine. And there I hung.

I dumped the lens box and the camera and the tripods off and, in the operation, I lost my hold on the horse and fell off to the right and rolled down the ravine through the briars and the bushes. Was I cut up! Well, well, my watch was gone. That of course, was immediately restored. My clothing were a complete mess. I believe I finally gave away everything except the shoes. One sleeve was torn out of my coat. You can imagine the amount of pressure, the tension, I had exerted on the clothing I was wearing. I was supplied with an entirely new outfit. One pair of jodhpurs I am wearing today came to me about three weeks after that experience. It took the tailors some time to duplicate the ones I had destroyed. I recovered from my wounds in a very short while. In twenty-four hours, I was ready to go on again. I was patched and plastered considerably. And I had been given an anti-tetanus inoculation and that made me unsteady and I broke out in a lot of welts on the side of my face and Doris teased me enormously, saying I had developed one of the unfortunate diseases.

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But this will give you some idea of the extent to which we went to get what we wanted in the way of photography and legend. It wasn't all as serious as this and it wasn't all as difficult as this, of course, a great deal of it was very easy. We would pull up in front of someone's house right beside a very nicely paved road, take out the camera, set it up, and I would say, "Folks, we've come to take your picture." And they would line up in a row and that was all there was to it. Sometimes they would even go back in the house after the . . .

[recording interrupted]

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I'm not quite sure where I was when the tape broke. I believe I was describing the difficulties I had when I fell off the mountainside, my horse having slipped off the pathway, and I was also explaining how nice it was to be working for someone like Miss Ulmann who not only paid you for your trouble and treated you like a gentleman but supplied you with clothing when your clothing were destroyed when you were in her employ. It worked out usually that I got better clothes after my original clothing were destroyed because she went to the best places and to places like Fortnum & Mason or the good military tailors in New York City to buy my riding clothes when my original riding clothes were destroyed.

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I would like to repeat that we did not always have such difficulties. Many of our enterprises were as easy as pie. We would drive our car up beside someone's home and immediately beside the very nicely paved highway and set up our camera and go to work. The family would cooperate with us and they would even go inside later and put on their great grandmother's linsey-woolsey and go up in the attic of the house, or the cabin as the case may be, and bring down the spinning wheels, and portions of looms, and cards and other things, and show us how their ancestors carried on and then, of course, we would photograph them in these magnificent clothes. I remember very well at Pine Mountain how four of the girls were dressed in the granny's linsey-woolseys and posed in front of one of the cabins. One of those girls has since turned out to be an eminent doctor in Baltimore and the other two are school teachers.

[00:02:29]

Pine Mountain was a great treasure trove for us. We photographed many interesting people in and around the settlement and I took down some wonderful folk ballads not far from there. The story of the girl from Cutshine who married a boy from Pine Mountain against the advice of her Cutshine friends, his death, and her refusal to do much more than smile for the rest of her life came to us at that period. It's such a long story I shall not have room to tell it here. Miss Ulmann never paid anybody to pose for her and I, following her advice, or she may have been following my advice, I am not quite certain at this late date. I never did employ anybody to sing for me and she never employed anyone to pose for her. I remember once in New York City we photographed a fruit stand and the owner of the fruit stand suggested to Miss Ulmann that she give her little child twenty dollars to buy a couple pair of shoes. Miss Ulmann was outraged and we put the camera back in the case and went on our way. I believe a portion of that photographic enterprise in Bleeker Street still exists. There were some very interesting Italian food vendors there in the thirties.

[00:04:10]

Miss Ulmann made some interesting tours into Dutch Pennsylvania. We photographed the graveyard, the churches, the school houses, the barns, the wonderful dairy barns. It was quite an experience. We made a tour over to Boston, where we photographed the Harvard dons and I restored, or renewed, my acquaintanceship with the people I had known in nineteen hundred and nineteen, twenty. She photographed Calvin Coolidge and Mrs. Coolidge. Calvin Coolidge practically said nothing all during the process. He was just as taciturn as legend had him be. It was at that time that the Calvin Coolidge story came out. I'm not sure whether he told this to Miss Ulman or if Mrs. Coolidge told it but Miss Ulmann came back to me with this yarn. That Coolidge had gone to church one Sunday morning and left Mrs. Coolidge at the home and when he came home she said, "Well, Calvin, what was the sermon about?" And, he said, "Sin." And, she said, "Well, what did the preacher say about sin?" And Calvin said, "He was agin' it."

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I loved Boston very much. I of course took Miss Ulmann to Durgin-Park's restaurant where she could eat practically nothing, but I took the menu from top to bottom. It was a great experience and it still is although I think Durgin-Park is rather a firetrap. And if it ever caught fire no one would ever get down those narrow steps. It's on the second floor of that building over there by Faneuil Hall. After Miss Ulmann went to working with me she became more of an authority on restaurants because I was very much interested in food and every where we went the very first thing I did after I got her safely established in the hotel room where she could set up a dark room—incidentally, we carried yards and practically bolts of black clothes which we tacked up in windows and made kind of a labyrinth for her so she could change plates—as soon as I got her set up in the room and a dark room I went around and studied the town and tried to find out where we could, possibly, procure food and that food, of course, was food for me and Miss Ulmann could manage a long while on even their poor grade of black coffee. I carried a certain type of coffee with me always for her in case the coffee was absolutely not palatable. She loved the kind of coffee with chicory in it which I was able to get at Macy's in New York City. Instant coffee hadn't appeared quite yet. There was a type called George Washington coffee on the market and it was rather poor. The present-day instant coffee would have been a great delight to Miss Ulmann. She had a considerable lot of electrical equipment she used for warming soup and warming water. Well, she



had a cup, an electrical cup that you could plug into the wall, an electrical affair in which water boiled very rapidly. We made her food and soup and coffee in this kind of a device.

[00:07:43]

She always asked people if they liked their job. I remember one time we were photographing a man who was an eminent tanner. He was in the act of putting up a bunch of calf hides, calf skins, when we came upon him and Miss Ulmann said, "How do you like your job?" And he turned to her and he said, "I don't dread it." He was an eminently widely known philosopher and beside being an excellent tanner. One of those tanners gave me a long yarn on how to tan leather. It takes, I should say it would take forty-five minutes to tell it all and one of the principal refrains in the entire story was, "Depending on the weather." Everything depended on the weather. The number of days, the number of hours, the amount of lye, the number of licks the leather got to knock the hair off of it, all these things depended on the weather.

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Miss Ulmann was fascinated with these local tanners. One tanner was making up a large sheet of leather to be used by a local blacksmith over there in the edges of Tennessee in the Melungeon country. The Melungeons claim, and some of the authorities in that part of the world claim, the Melungeons are the descendants of the lost tribe, Raleigh's tribe. However, these Melungeon blacksmiths were very, very wonderful blacksmiths and they stuck to their ancient devices, their ancient tools, their ancient methods. Instead of having a blower to blow up the forge, one that you would twist around and around and around, they had the old bellows tied and a boy pumped the bellows and they did some wonderful iron work. These bellows, the sides of them, as you may know, are made of folded up sheets of leather and they are large sheets. This blacksmith at this time was making up a new set of bellows leather and it seemed to me as if had leather enough to cover—well I'm sure that one of the pieces was six feet wide and ten feet long—and he said he had yet to make some more for the trimmings, for the findings he called them, the leather findings that went into the manufacture of a great pair of leather bellows.

One extraordinary experience we had on horseback was a trip we made into Grassy Valley, which is on the edge of Tennessee and North Carolina, not a long way from Asheville. I suppose we drove over there in an hour and a half. It's not very far from that magnificent highway called the Skyway Drive. It's a roadway running along the ridge of those blue hills, that magnificent set of hills. The new drive wasn't finished then, they were just starting it twenty years ago. We went by back roads, and rather perilous back roads they were, from Asheville to Boone. That's Boone, North Carolina, and at Boone we rested over in the Daniel Boone Hotel, a very characteristic name, of course. It was a very sweet, comfortable hotel. And the next day we went on to Grassy Valley. We carried a woman with us who was known in Grassy Valley, had bought a good many of their woven articles and sold them in her store. This gave us an entry, of course, into Grassy Valley.

[00:11:36]

In Grassy Valley we encountered an old granny woman who was more than a hundred years of age. She had known a good deal of Indian fighting in the early days of her life. In nineteen-hundred and thirty-three she was more than a hundred years of age. So, you can see that in eighteen-hundred and twenty-three there were certainly Indians moving around in that country. Her great, great-grandson teased her

about having had an Indian boyfriend when she was a young woman and it was a considerable source of humor in the family. We photographed her, we photographed her looming, we photographed her spinning, and we photographed her carding wool, we photographed her with this delightful great, great-grandson who was also a weaver of some ability. She sold a considerable crop of wool, all carded and spun, every year and she sold it through a group of people in Asheville, North Carolina who sent it in turn, she said, all the way to Scotland to the Hebrides. Now, whether that was true or not I was never able to discover. But I know that she got a very handsome piece of money for her spun wool.

[00:12:56]

Miss Ulmann wanted to make a gift to these people and before we went over there, in Asheville, North Carolina, I went to a store and bought a little inexpensive handbag and filled it with string, two pairs of cotton gloves, a cheap pair of scissors, some Vaseline, some aspirin, a bottle of vinegar, a can of rising powder—that is, baking powder—a box of soda, some corn plasters, a spool of adhesive tape, some what they call arnica. I'm trying now to think of the name of that product in modern times. I can't think of anything, but one of these devices we've put on little boys' cuts with the glass dropper these days. Well, the name leaves me. It's not awfully important anyhow. They called it arnica. And a few other small items, I can't remember exactly what they were. Altogether, I think I spent a dollar and seventy-five cents or two dollars because a dollar and seventy-five cents bought an awful lot of things during those days of the depression. And this bag was presented to granny Greer, the old granny woman, and she reacted to it like a child on Christmas. It was the most delightful thing to see her open that bag and take out these articles one at a time and go into gales of laughter and clap her hands over them.

[00:14:51]

The trip into Grassy Valley was made on horseback. I rode an animal as reluctant an animal as I ever got a hold of in my life. And Miss Ulmann had a great slow moving Percheron type. She got along very well. Her fancy jodhpurs made quite a picture and the men folk at the Barlow's storehouse where we stopped to water the horses, the men folk got a considerable kick out of this city girl riding astride a horse in them tight pants. They never knew the word jodhpurs, of course. I was almost unhorsed that day because my animal refused to pass a hay rake, a sulky rig, not a surrey, the kind we have now a days, but a sulky and it was being pulled by a team of mules. Ordinarily, one horse pulls these things but this team of mules was coming down the road prancing head up and my horse simply went into an act. I thought for once I would be unhorsed by a plow plug of a lowest grade but I managed to back him around into a ditch where he could neither go forward nor backward until this team got past us. In this operation I almost dropped a lens box, and Miss Ulmann, if I had dropped the lens box I am sure she would have taken strong measurers. She certainly would have told me what she thought.

[00:16:26]

Her attitude toward my irregularities was one of very kindness and she put up with my continual desire for better food and my unwillingness to stay up late and my desire to write everything down in little notebooks and my desire to stop the car every time I heard a sound that even faintly resembled a musical sound if there was a dance going on somewhere and someone was picking a banjo I was certain to stop. Miss Ulmann usually got a certain amount of enjoyment out of these country dances and she always used the slow process in photography, never the candid type of photography in vogue now. Therefor, moving objects were never very effective as subjects for her photography.

[00:17:28]

She did however pose some dancers once and took some very effective pictures with the feet in pair, their toes pointed. They were about to go through the steps of Paul and his Chickens or The Paw-Paw Patch. They were really quite effective. Of course, the thing she did best was still photography. She also did some wonderful pinholes. I made her a set of brown planks to slip into her lens board in place of a lens. These plates had graduated holes in them. Some of them a sixty-fourth of an inch. In one of them I had a hundred and twenty-eighth of an inch. I had to have a man in New York City drill that hole. A jeweler did it. And this type of photography is a very simple affair. You pull out your plate guard and everything has to stand still, understand. You can't have any motion, or much motion out there. And you allow the camera to stand twenty to twenty-five or thirty minutes, and the results are like a stereopticon. It's what's called pinhole photography and I am quite certain that that is how photography was started. It didn't begin with a complicated set of lenses. It began by allowing light to pass through a very tiny hole onto one of Mr. Daguerre's plates.

[00:19:05]

Doris Ulmann loved photographing animals. She photographed mules and oxen. She photographed cows. I tried to get her to photograph a Siamese cat one time but I couldn't keep the cat still long enough. Bear stories, animal stories, generally, delighted her. The talking animals, how she did love the stories of the talking horses and the bear stories from the Cutshine country. Little Minnie Jordan and her wonderful story about the bears and the men who came down from the north and caught the bears and carried them off. "Until now," she said, "they ain't a bear in any of them parts, they've all been took away and put into zoos and to circuses and we ain't got a bear for ourselves."

[00:19:53]

Miss Ulmann moved bag and baggage into automobiles. She carried hundreds of glass plates which she put into plate holders, new plate holders, each night, taking out the exposed plates and putting them back into very carefully shrouded cases and boxes. The weight of this was enormous. About twice during the summer of nineteen-hundred and thirty-three and maybe as many as three times in nineteen-hundred and thirty-four, she sent her chauffeur in her big automobile all the way back up to New York where he delivered the exposed plates and brought back six or eight boxes of new plates. She was one of Eastman's really good customers for the DC, that's the double coated, DC Arthell six and a half, eight and a half, and eight by ten plates. You can imagine how much seventy-five plate holders with two plates each would weigh. I carried them on my back in two great big oil cloth sacks. One with this I would carry the camera and lens box and the tripod. I was not unlike the [Hunas?] of the southern European countries and the Middle East who I'm told are able to carry something as large as a grand piano on their back. I was never quite saddled with a grand piano but I certainly carried many a plate.

[00:21:38]

Miss Ulmann seldom ever spoiled a plate. I can remember a few, but very few. And this was because of her great deliberation. She went about everything very slowly, very carefully. She thought it all out long in advance. There was no hurry up and no snapshot business. She was greatly opposed to the snapshot idea. And when I demanded a Rolleiflex and got it and everything that went with a Rolleiflex, an awful lot of wonderful equipment, and a wonderful light meter, one of Mr. Weston's best. We happened to

know Mr. Weston at that time and he supplied us with a wonderful light meter. Doris immediately looked upon me as a complete faker. Up to that time I had been working with a four-by-five and using DC Arthell plates and doing some pretty fair things. As soon as she saw me with a snapshot affair she put me down at the bottom of the page.

[00:22:46]

However, as she grew less able to move around, I mean her illness caught up with her during the summer of nineteen-hundred and thirty-three and into the early days of 1934. As you all know she died August the fourth, nineteen-hundred and thirty-four. As she grew less able to move around, I began to take over the tasks of the photography more and more. I would set up, I would focus the camera, I would arrange the subjects, and I'd ask Doris if she didn't want to see it. And she would look at it. And sometimes she would hardly look at it. She would say, "Oh you got pretty good sense. You don't give much impression of it sometimes, but I think you've got pretty good sense. Go on and take it." And then that way I exposed many a plate for her. As I look at the prints now I had an opportunity to look through a good many prints over at Berea recently. I discovered ones I had taken. I remember Doris sitting in the shade quietly watching me and wondering whether it would come off or not and if it didn't come off she'd tell me so in a great way. She didn't live long enough however to find out whether they came off or not because that developing was done after her death.

[00:22:14]

The last day we worked together was on the top of Turkey Mountain, called Turkey Mountain, not a long way from Asheville, North Carolina, south of Asheville a little ways. We went up there and photographed a man in a tobacco patch, a man who sang a complete version of Maddie Groves, something I had been looking for for a long time. I had two or three fragments. I had been singing a few verses of it all my life, but this man came along with a complete version of Maddie Groves, and someone photographed him standing among this wonderful tobacco patch. He had tobacco up higher than his head at that time.

[00:24:56]

He was near ready to cut either and he was contemplating and going along and doing what they call priming the crop, taking off the valuable leaves at the bottom as they ripened. It wasn't usually primed in that part of North Carolina. They usually cut the whole stalk and hung it in the barn as we do in Kentucky. Well, the automobile, my automobile slipped off the road on the way up. It had rained the day before and I had a terrific time getting that thing back. I was exhausted to death when noontime came and we got up to the top of Turkey. These people had been expecting us and they had a dinner laid out on a long table, children standing over it with fly bushes. I don't know whether you know what a fly bush is but it's a bush off a tree and a child swings it back and forth and brushes the flies off the table. Well, I suppose they had everything on the table human being could ever think of in that part of the country to eat, including store boughten cookies. He had two or three different kinds of desserts. Miss Ulmann picked at the side of her food and I ate inordinately. Then we went into the photography. We photographed everybody in that family living there at that tiny place on the top of Turkey.

[00:26:08]

Another man slipped off the road and came to me and he said would you like to haul me back on the road. And I went down foolishly tried to pull him back and we both got off the road and they ultimately got a team of mules and went down and pulled us all back on the road. Finally, I could see in Miss Ulmann's face that she was not feeling very well. She had that gray look that is very terrifying and I got her in the car and got her home. Got her back to the Battery Park Hotel in Asheville, North Carolina. That was the end of her life really. She never picked up the camera again.

[00:26:46]

Half an hour after we got back there a Viennese doctor and his wife whom we had met sometime before called and said would we come to dinner. Doris dutifully pulled herself together and dressed in some of her most beautiful outfits and I rather reluctantly, I didn't want to go anywhere I wanted to rest I was weary, I reluctantly went along and we drove out to the Viennese doctor's home and had a wonderful dinner. And I played music and I sang music. I wonder how I was able to even get through it because I was weary and I was bothered over Miss Ulmann's condition. She became more and more languid and less able to move around accurately as the evening passed. I got her back to the hotel and about an hour later her nurse, who incidentally had been traveling with us, knocked on my door and said Miss Ulmann has a high fever and is in desperate condition. We'll have to call her doctor in New York and find out what to do about it.

[00:27:50]

I called her doctor and he was not in New York. He was in, up there in Pennsylvania, Scranton, Pennsylvania. I talked to him and he said bring her back to Pennsylvania at her very earliest moment and keep a chart on her physical condition. So, the nurse went to keeping the chart. The next morning everything was packed and she refused to fly, she refused to go on the train, she refused to go with her uniformed chauffeur. She said I'll go with the Johnny Niles and nurse and she got in my car and we started.

[00:28:30]

It was a dismal trip, a heartbreaking trip. I remember once upon a time we stopped not very far from one of those delightful North Carolina cities, Winston Salem. She said let's rest here. I got her out of the car and she sat on a log on the side of the road. And she said, "This is as good a place to die as anyplace I've seen for a long while." I got her back in the car and I got her into a nearby village where they had a filling station and a rather comfortable restroom. And I got her into the restroom and I encouraged her to lie down. Some negroes passed and they laughed and laughed and laughed at some little joke they were making among themselves. And one of the negroes looked in the doorway at Miss Ulmann and the laugh was cut off as if you were snipping a piece of magnetic tape. It hung in the air, the laughter that was ended.

[00:29:38]

She had the look of death in her face. We got her to Scranton, Pennsylvania and put her to bed. The doctor came and looked at her and said, "Get her to New York as soon as possible." We got her to New York and on August the fourth in the early morning she died. I think she left behind her a tremendous

tradition. She certainly left behind many, many hundreds of plates. She financed my operation. She paid me well, restored my clothing when they were destroyed, had my watch completely repaired and restored when it was smashed down there on the mountainside. She told me, she said, "You're a poet, you don't need much. Poets don't need much. If you overpay them they stop being poets." She was extremely smart that way.

[00:30:39]

We buried her in a quiet little graveyard north of New York City and we have a strange kind of point of view about Doris in our household. I'm sorry, I'm sorry she didn't have an opportunity to do photography in the old world. I think she could have had some wonderful experiences in Spain and Italy and France. As a matter of fact, we had discussed the idea of her photographing Spanish and French peasants, but that never came about. I hope you good people treat this tape kindly and don't publicize it too widely, don't promote it too widely. If you do, if you are required to publish it, then take certain things out of it. Let your good sense and your good taste direct you.

[00:31:54]

I have tried in every way to make this as informative as possible without being overly sentimental over it. The one thing I can remember of Doris, one of the last few things she ever said to me was, "Johnny, you're a poet, you don't need much. A poet musn't have much. If you overpay 'em, they stop being poets." I suppose this is it. Best wishes to you all and a very Merry Christmas. This is John Jacob Niles, at Bootheel Farm, on the afternoon of Sunday, December the 22<sup>nd</sup>, nineteen-hundred and fifty-seven AD. Goodbye.

[00:32:58]

I should like to make a small addition, a P.S. more or less to this tape and correct something I said before. The Melungeon are thought to be descendants of the people who escaped by way of, from the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island. Many so-called discoveries have been made in the past few years concerning that colony but no one has taken the discoveries very seriously. We are really inclined to think that the Melungeon are part Indian and part white man. The women are very beautiful up to a certain point and the men are great powerful fellows and great workmen, grate artisans, tremendous blacksmiths, as I told you before. I'm sorry I made the mistake, I called the colony the tribe. John Jacob Niles, again at Bootheel Farm.

The word Melungeon is, of course, a combination of terms. The French say "melange," which means mixture. And, in this case, we feel that the tribe is a mixture of Indian and white blood. This is a second P.S.

[00:34:18]

[recording ends]