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COTY HOGUE: Today is February 24, 2007. I am interviewing Mary P. K., or Pennington King.

MARY P. K. FRESKE: Penttinen-King.

HOGUE: Penttinen-King. We are interviewing for the Whatcom County Homemade Music Society collection for history of that organization. Before we start out, I just wanted to make sure that I have permission to record this and deposit it in the archive.

FRESKE: Yes.

HOGUE: For purposes, can you state your name and where you were born and the year.

FRESKE: Mary Penttinen-King. I was born in Pasadena, California, in 1942.

HOGUE: Great. If we go back a little bit to your childhood growing up and you focus and think back about music and your childhood, what are some of the memories that pop up for you there?

FRESKE: I can't remember ever not singing, so I probably was singing at the age of four and five. I think the first song that I sang for anybody else was *Billy Boy*, and once I discovered that, I sang it to everybody, to their annoyance or whatever. And I think I probably got it from a Burl Ives 78, it would have been in those days. I did singing in elementary school in whatever choirs or groups there were, and I did singing in junior high school. I still have mimeographed sheets of music, of lyrics, from junior high school. I remember doing *Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill* and *Oklahoma*, and a wide variety of songs.

HOGUE: How did you get turned on to that kind of music? You mentioned Burl Ives. Was your family also musical?

FRESKE: Well, I guess we just had this. Mother sang, and she did church choirs, but I don't remember her singing much when I was a kid. My dad was musical; he was a big jazz fan, so we had a lot of the early jazz, the big bands, Mildred Bailey. I remember listening to her, and classical music. He had a hearing problem. His favorite way to listen was to lie on his back with his head up towards the player, so I can remember him

lying down there and listening. But they weren't performers by any means, but I think singing kind of runs in the family, actually.

HOGUE: You said you sang in choirs and you did even as early as middle school and you just really loved singing. Was it just singing? Was there ever any interest in playing music, or was voice your main thing?

FRESKE: I took piano lessons, but I didn't practice, so my mother, in her wisdom, said, "If you're not going to practice, we're not going to pay anymore." But I can still pick out the treble clef. If there's a melody, I can still pick that out on the piano, and that's still useful. In high school, I avoided driver's education classes because I wanted to be in the choir, and so it took me another ten or fifteen years to get a driver's license. I sang choir in high school, I sang in church choirs, I was a member of the Unitarian youth group. The guy with the guitar was a Weavers fan, so we picked up that repertoire for all of our camp fire singing, and Girl Scouts was camp fire singing too. I went to a – what would you call it? – settlement house or something in Washington, D. C., where we had work camps, and we would go into people's houses and paint the interior of the house. We always sang there, and in the evening we'd stay overnight and we would sing there. Joan Ornstein was the director. She had an autoharp, which she played on her lap, and so we did a lot of peace songs. This was the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, so we picked up a lot of adaptations of the spirituals that went into the Civil Rights movement. And we did a lot of international songs and that sort of thing. I think we were probably among the first people singing *We Shall Overcome* back in '58, '59, around in there. And then the father of a good friend of mine was giving guitar lessons, and my mother picked up this – I don't know whether it's – it's probably a weird guitar. It's a big thing with steel strings, and it was very hard to play. F hole guitar, I think it is? So I took a few group lessons with him, and they took me to some concerts. I saw Mike Seeger playing an autoharp holding it upright, standing and playing. "Oh, that's how it is!" And I got to see Elizabeth Cotten, and I didn't really realize what a marvel she was until much later, what a legend. So that's kind of where the folk music came into it. And we went to Bangkok for a year. There was a madrigal group there, so I did madrigals for almost a year. The fellow was such a purist, he wouldn't let us play the piano to figure out the melody. We had to do it by ear or we had to read it, so I got my little Girl Scout pitch pipe out and played each note [laughs] to figure out what was going on in the song. We sang *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* in Thai on Thai television and some other madrigals, but it was fun. Then I kind of dropped it for a long time. We had a few friends in San Diego who were folk people, so we'd get together and do sing-along kinds of things. It wasn't anything organized for years and years.

HOGUE: What did you do after high school?

FRESKE: I worked for a year, I went to University of Maryland for a year and joined the choir there. I sang alto; all the other times I've been singing soprano. Then I went to Bangkok for a year, came back, went to San Diego State, saw Peter, Paul, and Mary there, and Joan Baez. Judy Collins came too, but I don't think I went to see her. Then I got married and had kids and sang songs to them.

HOGUE: So singing continued to be a part of your life even when you weren't necessarily doing choirs?

FRESKE: Right. Oh, yeah.

HOGUE: How did you end up working your way up into this area, and what was the year that you finally went to Bellingham?

FRESKE: Well, the ex-husband had this weird idea that we should be able to make a living as dairy farmers. Mind you, he had never worked on a farm and really didn't like getting his hands dirty, but we moved up to Bellingham. His sister moved up here. They're from Sweden, and it's very much like Sweden, the terrain is, with the trees and the water and all that. I'm not sure why we picked Bellingham. I think it was more that we found a pretty good piece of land with a house on it that was affordable, more than anything. But it was a good move.

HOGUE: And was the dairy farm successful?

FRESKE: No! It was never a dairy farm. We had one cow named Hildy; it was actually Hildegard, which was a Wagner character. We milked her for a year and had calves that eventually – a couple of them, I think, went back to dairy farms and a few we ate. Mr. T-bone. Then the marriage split up and he went back down to San Diego, and I stayed up here. I was active in the American Civil Liberties Union in San Diego, so when we came back up here, I picked that up and was president one year, and we wanted to do a fund raiser, and I had noticed a picture of Larry Hanks and Laura Smith in the paper. They were doing a concert, and I happened to be going through the membership list and Larry Hanks' name showed up. So I [thought] maybe he'd be willing to do a fund raiser for us. So I called him out of the blue and said, "Would you be willing to do this?" and he said yes, and so we did it. That was probably '89 or '90 or something like that.

HOGUE: What was the year that you actually moved up here to Bellingham?

FRESKE: Okay. Ingmar was ... it would have been '82.

HOGUE: So it had been a few years before you found these people.

FRESKE: Yeah. Well, Stan was in San Diego part of that time, and I felt it was sort of unfair for me to develop this big social life without him along. Then because of that concert, I started listening to [Larry's] show, and he told me about Roeder Home having concerts and sing-alongs and so on. So at the time of the divorce, which was '89, I was looking for a place to go to meet people and just to find some community. And the song circles worked out really well because I could sing but I didn't like making small talk, so I could just come and sing and be around other people without ... how can I say? ... without feeling any pressure to be anything other than what I was. It was very cool, and I consider the folk music community my community now. I think it's an important thing

to do for people to sing together, really. I deplore that they're taking music out of the schools and that people are so performance-oriented. When you talk about them liking music, a lot of people talk about it as if it's something that they go to and they listen to but they don't participate in, and I think it's the participation that builds the community.

HOGUE: What in your opinion is it about sharing music and participating in music that is so special and can build that community?

FRESKE: I think that if you sing a song, you pay attention to it more, and so the words mean more, and folk music by and large has ideas in it. So I think it's important for that reason. Other societies, they're surprised if you say you can't sing because it's such an integral part of what they are, and of all the ceremonies that they have and the rituals, everybody sings. In western society, we don't do that as much. We have music as part of our rituals; there's always music at weddings and funerals and so on, but it's not participatory for the most part, I don't think. Once you sing a song, it becomes more your song, and I think that's important. I think that's why something like *We Shall Overcome* means a whole lot more to me because I was singing it under – I did some picketing and we sang it, and this sort of thing. So it becomes a bonding kind of a thing. People need that. That's one reason why I'm active in doing sing-alongs here, trying to make it so that people will come and sing.

HOGUE: When you found that Homemade Music Society in '89, '90, and you started participating in that and going to the song circles, how was that singing for you? Was there something different about what you had done in the past?

FRESKE: Well, yeah, because it didn't matter if you had four parts. There was a stretch when there was only about four of us that were meeting regularly. It was Flip and Rob and me and a fellow named Kerry, who I still see once in a while at concerts. But we met, just the four of us, for a long time because we were keeping it going. I don't know why that was, but now there's other people that are coming in. It just changes all the time. You can sing what you want to sing; you don't have a director saying, "Well, this is the music that we are doing tonight." It's quite different. It's been a broadening experience in that I found I could sing harmony. I never thought I could. And through the informal thing and having the confidence that nobody cared whether I hit a wrong note or not, I could sing harmony. I discovered that I had a whole lower register that I wasn't aware of, and that led to singing tenor in Kulshan chorus for about twelve years. Yeah, I always thought I was a straight soprano, and then I discovered that register below middle C that goes down to low C. It's been interesting.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit about how when you first started going, how did you experience the structure of the organization and how has it changed or stayed the same in that fifteen years?

FRESKE: You know, I was never really aware of a structure because all we did was sing. Nobody called the meeting to order and nobody solicited dues. Of course, you know, I know that there's a name to what we do, but that's simply because we have to

name things. It's not because somebody took a vote and said this should be the Whatcom Homemade Music Society; it's simply that you need a label to talk to other people about what you're doing. You can't, say, put out a poster, "This is sponsored by Some People." You know, you have to have a label on it. But I never thought of it as being an organized group.

HOGUE: You mentioned that, for a long period of time, there was just this small group going, and now there's more people going. Talk a little bit about that flux of people and the fluidity of people and how that's sort of fine and how that changed.

FRESKE: Selfishly, I prefer the smaller groups because when you have a very large group, you only get to pick one song maybe in an evening. And so then you have a decision to make as to whether you do something that you might really want to do or if you want to play into what's going on and kind of the sorts of songs that have preceded you. But large groups are fine too because the more people you get involved in something that's important, I think, the better.

HOGUE: Why do you keep going back every other Wednesday?

FRESKE: Because it makes me feel good, I guess. I dropped out for quite a while; I had moved to town and doing Kulshan chorus every Thursday night and trying to preserve the voice a little bit anyway. I didn't come to song circle for a long time, but I'm glad I came back. I started feeling that that was my community, and I wanted to go back to it. So it's become more or less regular now.

HOGUE: We've been talking about the song circle part of the Homemade Music Society. They also host concerts that other Wednesday, every other Wednesday, and you've hosted concerts and you've been to concerts. Can you talk a little bit about hosting some of those concerts and maybe some of them that you've done. When did you start hosting concerts?

FRESKE: I don't know when Richard started soliciting hosts. When I first joined, Steve Dolmatz set up the program for the year, and that's the way it was done. It was his decisions all along, and then when Richard took over, he started soliciting hosts to set up concerts. I kind of figured if there was somebody that I really wanted to hear, why not sponsor the concert and not depend on somebody else bringing that person up or out? I've tried to get people that otherwise – I mean, I think that a lot of concerts that we get are people that are passing through from outside, that are on a tour, and so they'll hit Vancouver and Bellingham and Seattle and wherever. And I've sponsored local people that would otherwise might not be. I'm hoping Orville Johnson and Mark Graham will come up this next year. I've emailed Orville, and he was going to talk to Mark, and I have to email him again and line that up. I've sponsored Jeff Morgan a couple of times. I don't know if you know Jeff Morgan, but he's a singer/songwriter. He's got, I think, four or five songs in *Rise Up Singing* that he probably wrote when he was in Nashville for a while. And he's been doing mainly Balkan music, and so it's been kind of a joke that we do a – his birthday is in December, so we do a birthday concert every couple of

years. And then Carolyn Crusoe is a dulcimer player on Orcas Island. She knows the daughter of somebody that I work with. So, you know, why not sponsor somebody who might not otherwise be heard up here? And then she brought in a couple from Minnesota, Curtis and Loretta. Who else have I sponsored? Hank Bradley and Kathy Whitesides a couple of times. But as I said, you know, if you want to hear somebody, you just – and it's really easy. The host's responsibility is to make sure that Dana at the Roeder Home has pictures and a story to send out, so you write something up and she duplicates and sends it out. I don't have to make phone calls to the media or have my own little media list to work from and that kind of thing. And my son, Carl, does graphic art, so I get him to do a poster. So it's really easy to sponsor a concert.

HOGUE: And how is that experience hosting? What has the experience been like? You were talking about it, but getting that experience to host a concert and make some live music happen – what is that like?

FRESKE: Well, it's fun, and I think it's ... Poor musicians, they don't make much money, so it's kind of nice to help support that. And you don't know who is going to be in the audience for whom that music might really speak to. That kind of thing too. And a lot of the musicians, they encourage people to sing along, and that's my favorite part.

HOGUE: Do you have any favorite memories, either in the song circle or going to a concert or hosting a concert?

FRESKE: Not really favorites, no.

HOGUE: Any that stand out?

FRESKE: I don't think so. That may be weird, but it's all been good. I can't think of anything. If you gave me a couple of days, I might think of something. But a lot of it is simply meeting people that are like me, and so there's sort of an instant rapport with a lot of these folks. So there's been sort of a structure to do that.

HOGUE: We've touched on that subject of community and this community through music. I'm wondering if you can maybe elaborate a little bit about specifically this community and how it's able, do you think, to keep going.

FRESKE: A lot of it gets pinned on a couple of people. I think Flip Breskin has been a focal point for folk music in Bellingham and encouraging people to go to concerts, and because she's been doing Puget Sound guitar workshop, she knows people from all over the country who will come to Bellingham to play because there is a community that will come and listen to them. Richard Scholtz is another one. And none of them, they don't seek the limelight; it's not an ego trip at all. It's just that that's who they are, and they encourage people like me to try new things like song writing and that sort of thing. I don't know if it would have developed the way it has without people like Flip and Richard. And there's others too. I mean, there were people in the very beginning that were a core group: Laura and Larry and Flip and Richard. There's still some things in the

notebooks that we use that are in Laura Smith's handwriting. It goes way back because they thought it was important for people to come together and sing.

HOGUE: Do you have – I don't know if 'idea' is the right word – any thoughts about the future of the organization?

FRESKE: [laughs] Well, if it's not an organization ...

HOGUE: The future of that particular community.

FRESKE: I hope that there will be those that will carry it on. And I think it really does come down to people who have the ability to have people coalesce around them. That's my hope; whether it will work out that way, I don't know. It's been the same people for many years now, and maybe there's some young person [laughs] who would be able to be that sort of personality. I don't know. I hope it continues; I think it's important.

HOGUE: Did you ever expect to have the kind of experiences that you've had in this organization?

FRESKE: No. It's sort of an evolution, but if you had told me when, say, I had left San Diego that I would find this community and be singing harmony and writing songs and maybe learning an instrument and meeting these cool people, I would have said, "No, there's no such place." It's sort of a utopia. I don't think that's unique; I think there's a lot of us that feel that way, that we were looking for a home and we've found one. When I retire, maybe I'll start an old folkies home. [laughs]

HOGUE: That would be something.

FRESKE: Yeah. We'd have a big front porch and we could just sit outside. [laughs]

HOGUE: Not just in regard to this community, but just as an overall, what is it about music in general – we talked about this a little bit at the beginning of the interview – but in your opinion, if you could get like an overall kind of statement or something about music and the power of it, what would that be?

FRESKE: I've always thought – well, not always – in thinking about music, it's hard-wired in our brains. We really cannot avoid it; it's there. And it's there – I'm not sure why it's there; there must be some evolutionary reason why it's hard-wired in our brains. But they've been doing more brain research, and they're discovering that yes, there are parts of the brain that are for music. And the fact that it's ubiquitous in other societies as part of their culture and so deeply embedded in how they bring the unison of the community through music and dance, to regard it just as a performance kind of thing ... I mean, that's part of it, but I think it really comes down to being participatory, and we need to do that more in our society. And I think that folk music is probably what would do it. I know that there are people that gather together because I've done it – sing Broadway tunes, you know. But in folk music, you find more of the emotion and more of

the speaking to ideas and feelings than you do in popular music. And I think you have to have, well, symphonies. Again, you go and you listen, but the musicians that are participating – it's interesting.

HOGUE: Is there anything that you have gained in this community, whether it be participation or learning something about yourself, that you have been able to take to the outside world, the outside community, in any shape or form?

FRESKE: Hmm ... outside the community ... Well, I think sponsoring concerts is a little bit like that. I don't really go very far. [laughs] But –

HOGUE: I guess outside into your everyday life.

FRESKE: Oh. Not specifically, but insomuch as that's one of the things I do. You know, if somebody says let's go sing something, I'll do it. [laughs] Yeah, not really. It's just there. I don't make a point of taking it anywhere. But if I can persuade people to come to concerts or come to song circles, in that sense, yeah. If I hear somebody singing, "Oh, wow, you know, you really should come to song circle some time; you might like that."

HOGUE: How has music made you grow personally?

FRESKE: Oh, just finding that I can do things that I didn't think I could do. It's been – I think that's the main thing. I organized my own concert at Roeder Home and had a bunch of people; I'd lined up, I think, ten or twelve people and did about two or three songs with each of them. I never thought I would go out on a limb like that, and I'm not sure now why I did it, but it was fun. It was fun doing the rehearsals and picking songs, and we raised, I think, over two hundred dollars for women's care shelters, so that was good. So yeah, that was a real stretch; I don't usually do things like that, but I got some crazy idea. It was fun. I should say when I first started, my name is Mary Freske, and I picked up Penttinen-King about eight years ago when I decided I didn't like the ex-husband's name. So I took my mother's Finnish name and put it with my maiden name.

HOGUE: Great. And I guess to finish up the interview, is there anything else that comes out for you or that we didn't talk about that you would like to talk about a little bit.

FRESKE: I don't think so. Folk music has changed. I got these out of the library – Hootenanny? It's a show that was on in the early Sixties, and I watched those and it was sort of interesting because folk music at that time was being used for more commercial things, and people were getting hits, like the Weavers and *Good Night, Irene*, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, and all of those people. But on these particular recordings, I think there are very few recently written songs. I think that came later as social issues came up that people who wanted to write songs would write about, and they ended up being in the folk song vernacular rather than in the popular. And that's a trend that's continuing. And that's a good thing, I think. I think folk music is what the folk sing, is some definition; I don't know whether it was from Lead Belly or somebody, but that's where you're going

to find the music that speaks to social conditions and how people are feeling about their lives. I don't think you'll find it in popular music, where it's commercial and you have to have a three-minute song or a two-and-a-half-minute song to fit on the radio. I think folk music is doing pretty well, actually.

HOGUE: Do you see yourself continuing participating in this sort of folk music community with the Whatcom County Homemade Music Society as long as it keeps going or you're around here?

FRESKE: As long as I'm alive, yeah. As long as I can sing, and then I'll probably even come just to listen if I couldn't sing anymore because it's community. It's my neighborhood.

HOGUE: Great. Thank you for doing this.

FRESKE: Oh, you're welcome.