

There From Here

Season One, Episode Two: "My Contribution to Art and Culture"

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Mary: Welcome to *There From Here*, a podcast about the people and stories of Maine. In this series we're taking a look at Maine humor - what it is, what it's about, and who makes it. In this episode I'm going to talk about the two most well known Maine humorists in my neck of the woods - one from away, and one from up the road a piece. I'm Mary Holt, and I like to think that the place I'm from can be blamed for why folks from south of Kittery never know if I'm being serious or not. The truth is, it's a little column A, column B. It's cold up here, the ambiguity keeps us warm, y'see.

Let me tell you a little bit about the next town over from where I grew up...

Mary: West Paris, Maine is rural, sparsely populated and rough around the edges. While a handful of people own hunting or ski camps, it's not the kind of place that summer people flock to as a vacation destination, even though it's only about 60 miles Southwest of Portland. Even those that do live in West Paris year-round tend to come from close-knit old families that have lived there since long before the town was incorporated in 1957. It's the sort of town where everyone seems to know everyone else, and everyone knows everyone's grandfolks and so-forth. The same goes for the surrounding areas of Norway, Paris, and Greenwood as well.

According to Samuel A. McReynolds, "...the concept of community has always been an important one in rural society. In rural New England, community has always been synonymous with town. Except for the few cities, the map of New England is covered entirely with towns..."

Historically, there hasn't been much to do in West Paris in the way of entertainment - and that definitely went for Norway when I was kid - there's a brewery there now, so things are looking up... West Paris being sleepy isn't a criticism, it's more of a point of fact made by residents both young and old. As far as what there is to do - fishing ranks high, what with such close proximity to several ponds, brooks, and rivers. Shooting at the few street signs with bb guns also ranks pretty high on that list, depending on who you ask...

It's no wonder then, that the residents of Oxford County have developed an abiding love for sitting a spell and weaving a yarn. None were so successful at this than native son, Joseph A. Perham, simply "Joe" to locals.

Joe Perham: *A lot of people think West Paris y'know, is out of things. But I'm telling y'right now something you might not know -that that town, folks, is one-half the distance between Queebeck City and Boston, Massachusetts within a quarter of a mile. I'd call that right in the middle of things, don't you?*

Mary: Though Perham was able to, over the course of many comedy records evoke a quality of casual Yankee ease, he was far from being a "natural". On the contrary, he was a Ph. D. holding student of human character who collected and honed local lore to fortify his jokes, songs, limericks, and stories. His primary sources for these stories were the people and landscape of West Paris, which left a mark on him as large as he left on them.

***Joe Perham:** "W.C." That's what the English call the indoor plummin'. "Water Closet" y'know... Well, the Curtis place don't have no indoor plummin'. They used an outhouse for three generations..."*

Mary: Maine humor is traditionally a genre of regionalist comedy which serves to confirm outsider notions about the state. Joe Perham successfully worked within the medium to entertain the people other Maine and Downeast humorists lampooned.

Joe was born on October 26, 1932 in West Paris to Harold C. "Red" Perham and Mary "Maizey" Slattery Perham. He was one of 13 children and lived with his family on a 200-acre farm. Talking to Portland Press Herald staff writer Ray Routhier in 2005, Perham noted that his father was proud of the fact that he had children in the local school for "...33 consecutive years...". This indicates that while the work required to run a family farm was important, academics were highly valued. This also contradicts Edward Ives' assertion that "...there is an emphasis not only on a lack of formal education but a certain practical contempt for too much of it when rural Maine life is concerned..."

Joe graduated from Colby College in Waterville in 1955 with a degree in English. During his academic career at Colby, Joe took part in various theatrical productions including Hamlet in 1953. He also married his wife Peg Grover in 1954.

While attending college, Joe spent summers working in the feldspar mines in West Paris. He recalled in 2005 "...I remember breaking rock with a 14-pound sledge and y'had to have a pretty good grip..." It wasn't the easiest job.

Joe continued his education at the University of Maine where he received a Masters in english, and a Ph.D. in education.

***Joe Perham:** He had a B.S. and M.S. and a Ph. D. Now, a B.S. - any farmer can tell you what that means - an "M.S." mean more of the same of course. A Ph.D means piled higher and deeper - well..."*

Mary: Joe wrote his Masters thesis on Clarence E. Mulford, the Western Americana writer, and creator of Hopalong Cassidy. Mulford was born in Pennsylvania and spent a decade or so writing in New York, but he eventually settled in Fryburg, Maine, a town most widely known for the annual agricultural fail that bears its name.

In the forward to his thesis, Joe noted "...my interest in the subject of western literature and Mulford in particular dates back to my childhood reading and an early habit of following the movie serial heroes. It seemed remarkable to me that this character and these books were The creation of a Maine author..." Joe's thesis went on to explore Mulford's life and writing in what was, to the best of Joe's knowledge, the first formal study of its kind.

What is perhaps most striking about Joe's affinity for Mulford is his admission of surprise at learning that "a Maine author" had created Holpalong Cassidy and the world that he inhabited. Obviously Mulford was not born in Maine and only spent his later life in Fryeburg, but some emphasis should be placed on what it means to people, and especially young people, to have a sort of home-state connection to someone they admire. It was meaningful to Joe, a man who studied Americana and literature, that someone he respected had chosen Maine as a home. And not just any place in Maine, but somewhere that was only an hour away from West Paris. This may have been an indicator to him that it was possible to be successful creatively in Maine.

After completing his schooling, Joe went on to teach English literature, speech, and Drama at Paris High School, Leavitt Institute, and Oxford Hills High School (go Vikes!) where he served as the head of the English department. According to one of several lovingly written and surprisingly funny obituaries, Joe never missed class in nearly 26 years of teaching. Joe also never stopped performing during those years, He traveled the state, lecturing, telling stories, auctioneering and square dance calling. It stands to reason that in all those years of teaching travelling around the state and performing that Joe was also listening to the people he encountered and collecting stories.

According to Wendy Griswold, "...Maine has an unusually strong sense of place... and furthermore, Maine reflects Mainer's experience over time..." Given that assertion, it stands to reason that actual Mainer's made for good subjects in researching what makes Mainer's tick, and laugh. After all, as Griswold asserts "...while a clear sense of place exists in the heads of residents, it has to be renewed by regionalist cultural objects and practices, otherwise it will atrophy..." In other words, regionalist humor as Grisowold sees it, serves to reinforce Mainer's sense of place, which is something worth preserving.

Joe made a name for himself as a humorist - something he referred to as an "avocation" and by the 1970s, he was appearing on MPBN, Maine's local PBS affiliate, on fellow humorist and Maine-native Kendall Morse's *In the Kitchen*. Morse's program highlighted many noted Maine humorists, and as the title of the program clearly states, he did so in a kitchen while seated at the table. The kitchen set was meant to mirror a common place that most Mainer's would recognize, a cozy afternoon post-supper chat with a neighbor who had come to call.

Kendall Morse: 'Bout the only thing that you can say about these stories is that we seldom let the truth get in the way of a good laugh..."

Mary: Kendall Morse's role, like any good talk show host, was less to glean any actual information, and more to grunt in the affirmative, or to "yes and" the story along for his guests. Here's a little bit of Joe to give you an idea...

Joe Perham: *You don't have to look very far, incidentally, to find a Maine humorist. Doesn't make any difference where you are. I came home here a few nights ago... I got home rather late, and I asked if my youngest boy had gone to bed. My says 'well, he just went up here a short while ago, maybe he's still still awake' so I went up y'know to say goodnight to him. And I got up and there he was, over there on t'other side of the bed, down on his knees. Now, I like to be a good example to my child'en, so I g'down on my knees and I started prayin' too. He looks cross the bed y'know, and he says 'whatcha doin', daddy?' 'Well' I says, 'I'm doin' the same thing th'you are, son'. 'Well' he says 'mommamas gonna be awful mad' he says 'there's only on pot in here'.*

Kendall Morse: *Ho ho ho - kids, y'can't beat 'em!*

Joe Perham: *No, y'can't!*

Mary: Morse could be seen chewing on the end of a tobacco pipe while absent-mindedly playing a game of solitaire as the likes of Joe and Marshall Dodge relayed their greatest hits in subdued and laconic tones.

Marshall Dodge: *...It just don't make no sense!*

Kendall Morse: *Oh well... I just forgot to mention the damn thing chased me from Sumah to Christmas!*

Marshall Dodge: *God Kendall, sometimes y'know I.. I find it awful hard to believe you.*

Kendall Morse: *[Laughs] I was just thinkin' the same thing 'bout you!*

Mary: They would do so as they sipped coffee from thick diner mugs - you know the type, the beige ones your grammy had. The truly fascinating thing about *In the Kitchen* is that it seems to exist out of time, which only serves to reinforce the timelessness of the stories and one-liners being swapped by the flannel-clad, "men of a certain age" seated at Morse's table. Again, this was entirely by design and was meant to be evocative of an idea of a place and time, just as much as the yarns being spun.

Mary: In his 2017 book about becoming a reluctant Mainer, John Hodgman wrote of Maine humor "...it is a very specific subset of comedy. It consists mostly of men with flinty Downeast accents giving bad directions to people from away. Also acceptable are stories about people

being chased by bears, defecated on by sea birds, and near-drownings. Punishment by nature is a common theme appropriate to the state, and unflappability in the face of same is another".

Mary: Most widely known as a television personality, podcaster, stand-up comedian and author, Hodgman has, in recent years, relocated from Massachusetts to Maine. He has, over the span of over roughly two decades developed first an aversion to, and now a sort of grudging respect for Maine humor in general. Hodgman's assessment, though presented in his typical glib style for the sake of comedy, is fairly straight-on. It is evident that he has taken the time to listen to more than one Maine humorist, though, like many non-Mainers, his primary focus is on Marshall Dodge.

Marshall Dodge: *I've been drivin' up this hill for two hours, isn't there any end to it farmer? [Old man voice] 'Oh Hell, strangah! There ain't no hill heyah - you just lost yer tw'ho hind h'wheels!*

Mary: In the world of Maine humor, the looming spectre of Marshall Dodge is ever-present. While scholars like Edward Ives and Maine natives alike have pondered over his "authenticity". Or "Maineness", this is debate that purists of any genres engage in constantly. In rock music, for example, Elvis Presley was just as famous for his swiveling hips and crooning voice as he was for appropriating the style of African American musicians. Regarding Maine humor, Hodgman even goes so far as to refer to the Bert & I recordings that made Dodge famous as "...an act of cultural appropriation and weird white minstrelsy that would not be rivaled in sheer gaul until the advent of Larry the Cable Guy..." Hodgman's assertion alludes to a perceived cynicism in Dodge's portrayal of Mainers that is arguably not there, and is never present in the best of Maine humor. A closer reading of *Beaches* reveals a sort of respect for the man by chapter's end once Hodgman engages with the pathos of Marshall Dodge's tragic death at the age of 47.

Marshall Dodge, according to Edward Ives "...a summer person telling stories to other summer people or to outsiders and the kindest thing that can be said about people who draw conclusions about either the Maine characters or Downeast humor on the basis of the repertoire Dodge represented, is that they are simply being fatuous..."

Where then, does this leave the work of Joe Perham?

Perham and Dodge, while both graduates of Ivy League colleges, Colby and Yale respectively - OK, Colby is basically an Ivy - came to their stories from different places. Ives was quick to note "...as a matter of fact, most of the people Dodge and Bert & I collaborator Robert Bryan credit as sources are summer people, even if they're year round summer people..."

Dodge repeated and re-shaped stories he heard from folks who vacationed in Maine reinforcing various tropes and stereotypes outsiders were familiar with. Among these were that Mainers were wry, crusty and rural. Equal parts clueless and clever, sometimes all in one joke. While Dodge would insert the names of Maine towns and cities into his stories, the specific locations

were never crucial to the outcome, but rather these details served to give outsiders an idea of where a story took place.

Marshall Dodge: *My a'nt has a summah cottage up on the crossruds of East Vassle'borah, Maine. One day last summah, I was out'n tha purtch rockin' and readin' the newspapah when I head a for-ehn sports'cah come up the rud t'wards me, and go right on through the west intahsection. He jammed his breaks on down't the bahruns, turn'd 'round, and come right back up again. This time he stahp'd right out front. [Dodge, in a posh voice] "Which way to East Vasselboro?" [Dodge in a "Maine" accent] Dont'cha move a god'arn inch!*

Mary: East Vassalboro may just as well have been Rockland or Camden - but Mainers know how different all of those towns are. To the average person from away, they're just sleepy little towns, populated by folksy old-timers who take questions like "do I take this road to Portland..." a little too literally. Conversely, when Joe Perham inserted the name of a town into his performances, he did so knowing full well of what and where he spoke.

His audience was hyper-local, and he played to them. If he told them a story about the farmer's daughter "up Patch Mountain way", the listeners might have a good idea of who that was. They might know her, or they might be her. Joe populated his stories with a cast of local characters, many of whom were real people. "Them Conant Boys" - "Conant" being a common surname in the area - or the owner of the Penley Mill, Doctors at Stevens Memorial Hospital in Norway, his wife and children - the list goes on. This served multiple purposes when we consider the type of performer Joe was.

Joe Perham: *How many of you read about that farmer, down at Oxford Plains - Smedburg? He had a fyah in his three-hundred acre wh'fiel'? Gen'ral alarm went out and fyah trucks from Norway, South Paris and Oxford come roarin' up on to the scene. Tried a while, didn't seem to do much good. All of a sudden, up across the fiel' come the West Paris fyah depahment. Now, that's one 1949 pumpah with Chief Phil Edmunds at the h'wheel, and six volunteehs on the runnin' bo-ads. H'Well, they went sailin' right by that wh'fahmah and n'those three fyah trucks n'all those othah fyah'mn right out'n the middle of that fyah - right to the source. Well, people watched in fascination y'see as a flurry of watah and axes and the volunteeahs from West Paris went tah work. Well in no time the flames and smoke begun to diminish. Befo'h long, that fyah was out. Well, when Phil and th'boys come out of the wheat, there was a reportah from WOXO who'd been on the scene come ovah an'said "Mistah" he said "that was the greatest piece of fyah fightin' I evah see in my life". He says "would you like to make a statemen' for the listening audience?" N'Phil says "Yessah I would" he says "I think it's damn time the town of West Paris fix the breaks on that truck..."*

Mary: The sleeves of Joe's vinyl LPs were printed with information about where and how one might book him as an entertainer. They also featured a brief biography of Joe that listed his

attendance at Colby and the University of Maine (go Black Bears) alongside his mine and mill work in Oxford County. This bio served to fully connect Joe to Maine, and to remind people that he was 100% local, and thus, "authentic". Anyone purchasing a record or CD, on the off-chance that they were doing so at a shop and not directly from the man himself, would have no question that he was from West Paris. In fact, many of his album covers featured a small drawing of the outline of Maine, with an outhouse marking West Paris's location rather than the traditional star icon.

Joe's Mainenes was no act - it was a point of fact. Furthermore, whereas the likes of Dodge, and later Tim Sample ultimately told jokes for a broad audience of Mainers and outsiders, Joe purported himself specifically as someone who performed for the people of Maine, and even more specifically, the people of Oxford County. He was down to earth - someone the locals knew would help to bring in the hay come fall, or to pull up a stool at the dearly departed Trap Corner General Store which featured prominently in Joe's comedic universe.

MArshall Dodge's approach to Maine humor requires listeners to place themselves just above or a little further away from the subjects of his stories. We are neither the lost traveller nor the old timer, even if we've ever been lost or the giver of bad directions. Dodge's oeuvre serves to poke fun at, and in a way. Reverse the so-called "Maine Myth" or "Maine that never was".

Sanford Phippen has bemoaned this reverence for falsified and softened views of Maine stating "the great bulk of Maine's popular literature unfortunately still suffers from the surfeit of superficial views from without..." Phippen might be delighted then to know that Joe's stories and jokes plopped listeners right down in the middle of the action - or, lack thereof - letting folks know, if they didn't already, what rural Maine life was really like, allowing folks to laugh about the tougher aspects of living in a whimsical place.

An aspect of rural life - and more specifically, poor rural life, that Joe frequently returned to in his work, was the outhouse.

Joe Perham: *I wantchu t'know that I know just about everything that there is t'know 'bout privies.*

Mary: It is important to note that Joe recorded the bulk of his albums in the mid-to-late 20th century. Many in his audience had been alive during a time in which every family had an outhouse. Many of them still had an outhouse - if not at their primary residence, then certainly up to camp.

In his article Functions of the Newfoundland Outhouse, yes it does exist, and yes, was in an actual peer reviewed journal, Gerald Thomas notes that "the common outhouse represented" as of 1989 when the article was published "...a mute, but stark reminder of the harsh conditions for many Newfoundlanders, a still recent past..."

West Paris, and rural Maine in general, shares much in common with the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Chief among these are poverty, remoteness, reliance on agriculture and fishing as primary means of income and survival and as it turns out, an affinity for the outhouse. Joe Perham would become an authority on outhouse humor, and it certainly did make up a fair amount of his recorded work. Thomas reasons that it does "seem incongruous to wax poetic about the outhouse because their function seems so very ordinary, but those who do so inform us of a down to earth practicality equally laced with a measure of down to earth humour".

Outhouse jokes were the greatest equalizer in Joe's catalog. While his bluer jokes referenced the existence of sex, they were likely to go over the heads of youngsters - but everyone could appreciate a joke about a kid "falling in" to the pit below the outhouse. This is because, despite the idiom attributed to Benjamin Franklin asserts, there's something in addition to death and taxes in life that is absolutely certain.

***Joe Perham:** (Singing) "Oh to feel once again that brief moment of pain as somehow you'd wet on your feet, 'was that wind blowin' under' you'd sit there and wonder if spiders would crawl on your seat. Now they never will issue any new toilet tissue can ever be said to compare so that page you had flogged from the Sears catalog from that section on girls' underwear. Now corn-cobs felt like Hell, but they worked very well, though some were inclined to abuse 'em, their color was such that you could never tell much if you were the first one to use em..."*

Mary: There is a concept in humor known as relief theory which states that humor is a relief of tension. In comedy, the comic is meant to build up the tension by perhaps presenting a concept that one is generally in polite company, not supposed to talk about. The comic exists as a catalyst for the audience to laugh at something which is meant to be personal or not spoken of, the laughter is a relief of tension. Perham told jokes about outhouses, and what goes on in outhouses - primarily that humans urinate and defecate, and that it is funny, primarily because it is taboo. This, at the very least, was something that native Mainers and summer people could all understand and appreciate. The richest of the rich, and the poorest of the poor must all relieve themselves, whether it be of tension, or of excrement.

The question of who Maine humor is for is hard to avoid when engaging with the topic. Some like G.H. Lewis posit that "...the Maine resident is reduced to a stereotype and frozen in an idealized nineteenth century time. Quaint folkways, Downeast humor, and the Maine accent are valued by outsiders as more than mere objects of curiosity, they are touchstones to historical roots that others feel they have lost". This line of thought plays into the notion that outsiders are primarily interested in Maine because Maine represents simplicity and escape from the modern urban life of filthy air and filthier streets. When one looks at the bulk of Joe Perham's work and understands that he largely performed for the people of his region at grange halls, country halls, and banquets, and not at country clubs in Connecticut, one might assume that his jokes are not universal. This is not the case, just as it was not the case that Marshall Dodge's albums were not entertaining to neighbors.

While not everyone who listened to Perham's albums or saw him perform was one of thirteen children or grew up poor, they could laugh at a joke like...

Joe Perham: *This is a true story, you, you can ask Milt Inman if you don't believe me. Last hunting season - last hunting season ovah, ovah theyah in Albany, this exhausted hunter from New Jersey stumbled out of the woods, and he fell into the arms of another hunter. N'he says 'O gawd' he says 'am I glad t'see you! I'm from New Jersey and I've been lost for four days and three nights!' [the other] hunter says 'Don't get your hopes up, buddy - I'm from Massachusetts!'"*

It's worth noting that Milt Inman is a real guy, and full disclosure, he's a family friend. I talked to him when I was first researching for this podcast a couple years ago. Milt told me that Joe never really worked that hard. He's a pretty funny guy too.

Perham gave the audience permission to laugh at him, the characters he created based on local folks, and themselves. He did not position himself with a wink and a nudge just beyond his subjects, he was right there in the outhouse with them. He saw and knew what it was to live the life of a rural Mainer, and didn't gussy it up for nostalgic purposes. The whimsy in his stories was rooted firmly in reality and did not offer up a picturesque view of lighthouses and mountains - well, maybe some mountains, but only if they were replete with backwoods types and easy to outwit bears. The magic of Perham's work was that he saw Maine and specifically, his hometown of West Paris. Much of his work exists out of time, a good fart joke is timeless, afterall. A man who once referred to his work as a humorist as an "avocation" became successful enough at it to retire from his beloved day job of teaching at the age of forty-eight in order to take up performing full time.

Joe Perham experienced Maine from the inside which colored his perspective and influenced how and for whom he performed. A lifelong performer, any audience was certainly a welcome audience to Perham. It was the people of West Paris, their farms, their general store, and the outhouses that Perham held the most dear. For anyone who had the opportunity to see Joe Perham perform, it is hard to imagine one without the other. Perham did not seek to subvert the genre MARshall Dodge popularized, nor did he elevate it to a higher artform, he told jokes, plain and simple. And he did it in West Paris.

Joe Perham: *[Singing] Now on Halloween night it was really a fright, you'd be in there and out in a minute! If you tarried a jiffy you might find your biffy tipped over and you were still in it. Like the loss of a friend, privies come to an end, and it's truly enough to confuse one, as we realize in sorrow today or tomorrow our children never will use one. With porcelains and chromes in the humblest of homes, every house has a bathroom today, and the privies are gone, only memories live on with the ghosts of a bygone day..." [Speaking] Well that's my contribution to art and culture...*