

[Mr. Mankowski]

Not as good as Captiva Yankee Folk Mrs. Zimmerman. John Mankowski Miss Ella Barlett Bill Hall I think the Mankowski' and Ella Bartlett [pieces?] are the best - and would make good short fillers. JCR. * Introductory story too long & dull. Actual recorded conversation good, though short.

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

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STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER ROBERT WILDER

ADDRESS NORTHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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DATE FEBRUARY 2, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT JOHN MANKOWSKI

ADDRESS NORTFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

John Mankowski is the only Polish farmer in our immediate neighborhood in Northfield. Plenty of his kinsmen live along the upper Connecticut Valley but John's farm, is a bit apart from the main group. John's sons - great, strapping boys seem to have no difficulty in getting along with both Yankees and Poles but John is less easily won over. He has difficulty with English, speaks his native tongue whenever possible, and he is keenly aware of certain Northfield traditions and customs which exclude him from full social and economic equality. A proud man, he resents the condescension of certain of his neighbors. Nor can he entirely reconcile himself to his sons' acceptance of ways and names manners which seem strange and horrible to him. John can be and has been a good friend if needed; he knows how to appreciate a good turn.

"What you do with my cat? How da hell you get his head in dat can?" These remarks of our neighbor, John Mankowski, on observing his black cat with its head firmly encased in a salmon tin, require a bit of preliminary explanation.

We had been troubled with skunks. How to get rid of the noxious animals was a problem. If we shot them and the shot was not instantly fatal, we would be socially ostracized. The same was true if we caught one in an ordinary steel trap. Even a box trap with the sudden closing of the top was hazardous. We didn't know what to do. But a hunter and woodsman, a bachelor, who lived by himself in a cabin near us, told us a way. He said to take a barrel, tilt it against a log or a stone, arrange a board for a runway to the top, and put a salmon tin in the bottom for bait. The skunk would smell the salmon, identify the barrel as containing it, would find the board and walk up on it. Then the skunk would jump down into

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the barrel and would not notice the jar when the barrel moved upright due to the skunk's weight. Then we would have Mr. Skunk safe in the barrel, with no perfume complicating things. We could then cover the barrel, remove it to a suitable spot and dispose of Sir skunk Skunk .

With the assistance of the woodsman, we contrived the trap. And the next morning we were awakened early by our small daughter with the information that there was a skunk leaping about in the raspberry patch with a tin can on its head. Knowing that skunks did not jump about we investigated. There was an animal leaping about with its head in a salmon tin all right. Our trap was not only sprung but the 2 barrel was on its side. While the animal had a tail like a cat, its head appeared altogether too small. However, it was no skunk, so we fearlessly put the barrel over it, slid a board under, tipped the barrel upright and investigated. We came to the conclusion that it was a very unusual animal and sent for the woodsman. He came, and so did a number of the other neighbors. In the meantime, we got out our books of reference on natural history. The woodsman was stumped. He'd never seen anything quite like it. Neither had the neighbors. All agreed that it was a species of otter. We thumbed through our book, and sure enough, we found a picture of the black otter that looked like our animal — as much as we could see of it — and we easily pictured the long, narrow head as encased in the can. In the descriptive matters however, it said that the black otter had partially webbed feet. We easily induced the animal to attempt to climb out of the barrel, and as it strained, we noted its paws. Apparently, it had partially webbed feet — at least they were not webbed. About this time Mr. Mankowski appeared.

After inquiring what we were doing with his cat — we and the assembled neighbors — he picked up the fearsome beast by the nape of its neck, seized the can, wrenched and twisted and finally removed it, released the cat, which sped for home like an arrow, threw down the can and faced us with his blue eyes blazing.

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Personally, I don't think he was ever satisfied with our explanation. It smacked to him of witchcraft, and he knew about witchcraft from the old people in Poland. Neighbors did not assemble, form a circle about a black cat and read from books just because they didn't know a domestic cat when they saw one. It was more likely that they were practicing magic in an effort to drive the only Pole in the neighborhood away. For it was well known that Yankees did not like Poles.

John, a short, wiry man with the characteristic broad face and high cheek bones of the Russian Pole, has been a member of a Cossack regiment and had served his time on the Turkish border. He has an easy, wide, smile, and is very popular with his fellow countrymen for his musical ability. He is, however, deeply religious. On various occasions he has consulted me, his nearest Yankee neighbor, on questions that troubled him. Once he wanted to know if I believed that there were devils in the center of the dust whirls that swept across the fields when the top soil was dry. He said that people in the old country said there were. And he consulted me very seriously as to whether it was better to take out crop insurance or to have his fields blessed by the priest, as he was doing. He was afraid that it might be flying in the face of Providence if he took out insurance and put himself beyond the reach of God's punishment, even if he were wicked and deserved punishment. I was expected to know that God gave the good , abundant harvests, and punished the wicked with hail, blight and insects.

John is a simple, childlike man, even if he was a Cossack in his youth, and even if he does keep a knout above the stove in the kitchen for his growing sons. Such sons! Every one better than six feet, and 4 in action or manners or conversation, not to be told from the Yankee youths. The mother is a pretty woman, (slender for a Pole), who was a lady's maid, and speaks Latin and French in addition to Polish and English.

It was some time after the cat episode before we dropped in to chat with John. He was busy with chores in his big well-kept barn but seemed willing to chat.

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"Yes, I own my place. Got it all paint up. Water run in the kitchen, 'lectric light, everything nice. Got 'bout twenty acre for cultivate. But brush go lak hell in pasture. Going to have wood lot there I [guess?]. Can't make boy cut. Boys no good no more. All care for is look pretty, chase girl, and go to movie.

"I not come here first. First come Hadley. Hadley people write to old country. I come to help raise tobacco and onion. I hear about dis place, that Yankee feller starving to death here. I buy. Get house, barn, land, big mortgage. Get job hired man on another place. Wife farm here. I farm after work. Pay off mortgage. Now I own place.

"Why not have my wife farm ? You ask her. She say you can't hire her work in house all time. Like to get out in air and sun. Housework same ting all time. Farm work different. She like it better. Yankee feller don't like, 'cause Polish women work in field. They say we use women bad. Guess what they don't like is Polish feller make money on farm where Yankee can't.

"No, I ain't a citizen. I was going save money, go home, be big people in old country. But now, guess I stay here. Too much trouble 5 in old country. To be citizen costs too much money. No good for nothing. All can do is vote. I don't care about dat. I don't understand Yankee fellers. They say we dam Polack, no understan' nothing. What for they kill snake, In old country we let snake live for kill rat and mouse that eat crop. Snake no do nothin. I no kill snake. N No have rats and less [bugs?] than Yankee. I get food crop when his bad. He say 'cause work all time, work women, work children. Why don't he try no kill snake ?

"Same in politic. Yankees say Russian are dam Communist. No good. Must stop him come this country. Here people vote for politician who make law for business man. Russia say why do all dat? Better let business run everything same as they try to do here. No have to buy vote to 'lect politician to make law for business. Have just one big company. Everybody work for company. Get rid o' politician, graft, an' ever'thing. Now here business

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spends lots of money try to run everything. Don't like government that business runs first place. Why not ?

“People from Yankee church come ever’ little while. They want dollar. Goin' have commun'ty sing, commun'ty Christmas tree, commun'ty something. Say must have commun'ty spirit, give dollar. Ever'body must help commun'ty. But they don' like Communism where ever'body work for community. Why not?

“Aw, some big people tell ‘em Communism bad. They don' know nothin' about it. They say Communism bad just like big people. They no think for self. They thing they vote an' run country. Ha, ha! They do like told, same as Russia.

6

“Why church people don't do like Bible say? No b'lieve it? If they do like Bible say, it bad for business. Bible Communist book, why no s'press it?

“I don' like politics. Don' want to be citizen. Don' want vote. Pay tax, yes. Ye get something for tax. Get road, get school, get AAA payment. Get pay for do nothin' with land. Sure! I do somethin' - plant other crop. No good to spoil land and let the brush grow like Yankee. Plant clover, somethin', make land good. Why de do dat? One place pay feller no grow nothin'. ‘Nother place spend money to build dam to give water so can grow crop

“Government people ver’ funny. John Kruk on WPA. He no need money, jus want job. Dey give him twenty dollars a week. Walter Dymersky been to college. He broke. Give him twelve dollar. Give peopl people say don't need, more money than people do nneed need . Why?

“I buy car. Have to take zamination for drive. I can drive all right. Run tractor, truck and old car round my place. But no get license first time. Feller say I drive all right, but I don' know what vehick'el is. Cost two-four dollar more to fin' out it are wagon, car, any ol' ting that go

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on wheels in road. Won't let me drive 'cause can't read vehick'el. But let French chauffeur drive that can't read notting. Why?"

With an expressive gesture of his big work-worn hands John looked at me with a question in his wide blue eyes. Before I could answer, bedlam broke loose in the barnyard and John was off to settle it. Once started, John was sure to pursue the subject when next we met.