VT Untapped™
Episode 13: Sounds of Camp

Sounds of birds and a babbling river.

Dean Spencer: What's happening here is a lot of quiet. You know, it's it's eerie to walk out in the morning on a beautiful summer day and not see bicycles out in front of the main house or to go out in the afternoon and not hear softball or laughter from the lake or to walk through the dining hall and have empty spaces rather than people enjoying their spaghetti. So there’s a lot of strangeness around that...

Bell ringing.

Cello Music.

Mary Wesley: Hello. Welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley.

The sounds you’re hearing were recorded this summer at Camp Killooleet in Hancock, VT. The camp was eerie and empty because for the first time in 93 years no campers came to Killooleet. The reason, of course, is Covid-19.

This is the second episode in a six-part series where we take you to six different Vermont communities where we’ve spent some time listening to what people are going through and what they’re thinking about. As you might be picking up, for this episode we also spent time listening to what it sounds like, at this particular camp.

Birds chirping.

Since 1927 kids aged 9 to 14 have come in droves to this small strip of land along the Hancock Branch, a tributary to the White River in central Vermont. But not this summer…

Kate Seeger: We made a very tough decision that we weren't going to run and we were going to break the hearts of kids who had been getting through the months of closed school because they thought ‘everything will be all right when I get to Killooleet’. And you understand, we’re a camp where most campers come back and can tell you in early September, how many days it is until we open the next summer.

Mary Wesley: That’s Kate Seeger, the director of Camp Killooleet along with her husband, Dean Spencer who you heard at the top of the show. On the day we interviewed them over Zoom it was raining in the camp house, which is the background noise you’ll hear when they’re speaking throughout the episode. Kate and Dean have been directing the camp since 1998 and
Killooleet has been in the Seeger family since 1949 when Kate’s parents, John and Ellie Seeger, took it over from the original founders.

Back in August I drove down to Camp Killooleet with Assistant Producer Abra Clawson to meet Kate, Dean, and Kate’s brother Tony Seeger who is also involved in the camp. Both Kate and Tony grew up going to Killooleet every summer and I should also mention that Tony is currently on the board of directors of the VFC!

During our visit we all wore masks and mostly stayed outside, toured the campus...ok yes we also visited the horse barn and maaaybe there were some carrots involved…

*Horses chewing on carrots, stomping.*

**Mary Wesley:** Abra also brought an audio recorder and made some recordings of the eerily empty camp. Maybe this sounds weird. Why record an empty space? For us, it was another way to observe and document the profound changes in daily life that have been brought about by the pandemic.

I mean, could you ever imagine dropping by a summer camp in mid-August and hearing this?

*Quiet wind and birdsong.*

**Mary Wesley:** What you’d expect to hear might be something more along these lines....

*Children swimming, splashing around, screaming.*

**Mary Wesley:** In fact...what you’re hearing now are the sounds of Camp Killooleet. They’re just the sounds of Camp Killooleet in 1958.

*Children eating lunch, talking, building crafts. One child says “what are you making?”*

**Mary Wesley:** No, we don’t have a time machine. Well actually, we kind of do! For the VFC and other cultural research organizations like ours, the historic recordings in our archives allow us to time travel. To revisit sounds and voices from other moments in time and other points of view. Listening to recorded sound offers us a unique way to connect with and understand the people and places represented in those recordings. Let’s try it now:

*People playing piano before lunch, children talking, one boy singing “greasy grimy gopher guts.”*

**Mary Wesley:** ...don’t you kind of feel like you’re almost there at camp? I wonder what’s for lunch.
These historic recordings of Camp Killooleet are not from the VFC archive. They were recorded in 1958 by Ed Badeaux and released by Folkways Records (now Smithsonian Folkways) on two LP's—"Sounds of Camp," which features documentary soundscapes of Killooleet and "Songs of Camp," which, as you'd imagine, is full of camp songs. They are used here with permission.

*Songs of Camp recording, track 01. A man sings and plays banjo, and others join in.*

**Mary Wesley:** Here's Tony, also in the rainy camp house, telling us about the recordings.

**Tony Seeger:** Ed Badeaux was a musician and singer, who was greatly influenced by our Uncle Pete Seeger.

**Narration:** That's right, THE Pete Seeger, who spearheaded the American folk revival and viewed folk music as a catalyst for social change.

**Tony Seeger:** Ed was a camp counselor and learned about singing at camps from Pete. And then came here to this camp and brought many of those songs, some and Pete's, "How to Play the Five String Banjo" way of teaching the banjo and guitar and singing here. And he decided he wanted to make a documentary recording for Folkways Folkways Records, a company in New York City, a private company, that was later taken over by the Smithsonian.

**Mary Wesley:** Our connection with Tony Seeger is really what led us to this story. Tony is an anthropologist and audio-visual archivist and the VFC is so lucky to have him on our board and taking an interest in our archive. He participated in bringing the old Folkways record label to the Smithsonian and served as the first curator and Founding Director of the new Smithsonian Folkways Recordings from 1988 – 2000. He's thought a lot about recording sound.

*Sounds for camp recording, kids playing baseball and an adult saying “Batter up.”*

**Tony Seeger:** Archives and archival recordings are different from history books. And because people who write history books edit history, but archival recordings, you have actually what people said and the way they said it and the silences between the words and their and and their use of language. And you can't get that any other way. So so there's a particular value to sound archives.

And recordings are a kind of time machine. They can, they can take you back and sounds can sort of spark memories that you might not have without the sounds. So I think it's a fascinating thing to be able to hear what this camp was like 60 years ago compared with what it was like last summer, which in many respects are very similar. The same piece may be played on the piano and they all march out and start talking at the same time on the, on the porch. We're still shouting at the campers about keeping the horses apart so they don't kick each other. And… Swimming sounds very much the same and so, so, so if you listen to last, we… thinking of last year sounds the sounds haven't changed that much.
Sounds of Camp riding practice, piano playing, children screaming.

Mary Wesley: Maybe last year Killooleet sounded like a timeless summer camp recording, but when Abra and I were there, it sounded decidedly like 2020… anything but normal…

Eerie silence of camp.

Mary Wesley: a camp without campers.

Dean Spencer: It's different to be here in the summer without the children here. And the sound that is most absent is that sound of children's laughter. And when we have alumni families who've stopped by to visit the lake, when we had Tony and Judy's granddaughters who were then visiting with their parents, come down to visit the lake or to play in the brook. We can hear those laughs hundreds of yards away and there's nothing like it.

Mary Wesley: Dean, Kate and Tony spent this summer at Killooleet along with their families...but they knew they wanted to connect with the children, families, counsellors and staff who were supposed to be there with them.

Dean Spencer: There were a number of our camp families who urged us to provide some online programming, which is ironic because we're resolutely screen-free here during normal summer. So we have installed some wireless and we've been with the help of about 15 or 18 counselors, running some digital programing for campers who want to participate.

Dean Spencer: Hi everybody - welcome to our 2nd virtual Killooleet sing. Welcome to campers, parents, camper families, staff, alumni, new families, we’re glad that you could join us…

Kate Seeger: We are streaming this over Facebook, and Facebook sometimes drops things

Mary Wesley: Over the summer Dean and Kate figured out how to offer virtual camp programming. There was cooking, dance, mapping, art… but it seems that one of the strongest threads that weaves through Camp Killooleet is music and song.

Kate Seeger: The sings at Killooleet are part of the heartbeat of camp for alumni and current campers. We have always had music at camp and it has become a very eclectic mix of music brought by the counselors and brought by campers. And so on a typical sing when we’re all here, the sing is in the corner of the main building and campers audition. One of the rules is you have to memorize all the words. So really you are knowing the song and you're able to present it. And a lot of songs are ones that campers know, staff know, and a lot of people sing along with. We encourage choruses. But also campers sometimes do a song they've just written, or they do a ballad that doesn't really have much of a chorus, or they play piano. And that's also happening on Zoom. And so it's exciting to see campers audition. And we've had a couple of songwriters auditioning, you know, songs they've just written that week.
Clips from a virtual campfire held in March. Multiple people singing and playing guitar.

Tony Seeger: You can't hear a singalong on Zoom. That's one of the, one of the sad things about music, because the part, camp music is often very involving and everybody sings together and creates community, in a sense, out of a group of individuals sitting on the floor and in chairs. But we often run it with um, everybody sort of on tiny screens so we can, we can as we're singing, watch people's mouths move and, and we encourage people to sing regardless of whether they're by themselves or in a room with a whole bunch of other people to sing along to. Because participation and making music is really the objective. And something like two thirds of the campers at camp present performance, perform some time at a sing during the summer. Is that right?

Kate Seeger: Yeah it's pretty high!

Tony Seeger: A it's a large number. So this is something that, learning to perform, learning to sing in front of other people with other people. This is really also one of the things you learn to do here as well as perhaps swing a softball bat or ride a horse.

Banjo music from Songs of Camp.

Mary Wesley: It's not really by chance that music has such a central role at Camp Killooleet. There's no doubt that the Seeger family legacy of creating community around music and song is alive and well.

Tony Seeger: So much attention has been focused on music and schools and so little attention has been focused on summer camps where there's a whole lot more music happening and also where so many millions of people are experiencing it and then taking it home and teaching it to their friends. So I think… the music is important to them and they make it at camp and they're influenced, and remember it from summer camps for decades afterwards...

Banjo introduction to “Sipping Cider” from Songs of Camp.

Narration: Let's listen to some camp songs from 1958…

Sipping Cider continues, one man starts singing and is joined by others.

Dean Spencer: There's also a piece of it that is very much about crossing that divide between audience member and participant or creator, that if you are in a world where there is very little electronic input. Then you're going… We need the sound and if we have very little electronic input for it, then we're going to need to create the sound together.
Mary Wesley: Dean, Kate, Tony and many Killooleet campers did still find ways to create the sound together, even during Covid. And one thing that made that possible was the sense of a tight-knit community that has been fostered at camp Killooleet for generations.

Kate Seeger: I think the thing that, about… this reminded us that part of the community's power is the connection between people and the fact that we could encourage that connection, even through an artificial community, through Zoom, was very exciting. And it reinforced the importance of, for humans to find ways to connect in communities that are supportive.

Fire Crackling.

Tony Seeger: There’s a track, the last track on that album, Songs of Camp, begins with our father talking about the end of the summer. And he says, "We're like a fire. We blaze for a while and then it's over. And so when it's over, this is the end. But while it has happened, wonderful things have happened.

Sounds Of Camp track 15 - “The Last Camp Fire” - I've always said and I'll say it again...the camp is very much like a fire it burns and goes out but it makes a pretty fire while it's burning and it's nice and warm and everybody that was here could feel the warmth of camp as it burns all summer. And I wanted you, each one of you here, tonight, to put something on this fire to more or less make it a group fire. Then we will, we will take a flame from it and light all the candles and set them sailing across the lake in a symbol of the fact that you are now going out across the distant spaces. And I would like each cabin to come up here and drop something in. You can say something if you want. You can speak, or not....

Tony Seeger: Each child is given a piece of shingle with a candle on it and gets it lit and then can float it off into the lake. They then become sparkling on a nice evening...becomes a sparkling lake indeed. And we also put one out for Margaret Bartlett, the founder of the camp. And so, in a way, the final campfire is not only ending a summer, but it's also recognizing the continuity of the ends of summers with from the very first in 1927.

Children giving campfire speeches in Sounds of Camp track 15. “These are the names of all the people in my cabin who helped me have a great summer this year.” “This is nothing at all but just, I'm thanking everybody at Camp Killooleet for helping me have a wonderful summer.” “I'm putting in this top, which was the top of some juice which Bob and Peg gave us, in memory of all the good food that Bob and Peg gave us.” Everyone laughs.

Mary Wesley: This year, things were understandably a bit different.

Kate Seeger: We are gonna to try to have a last campfire and we are urging people to figure out if they can float a candle in a little bowl of water. And I was doing a test with a piece of cardboard with a little piece of tinfoil on it. It works pretty well, if the candle’s not too tall. So, you know, as a way of saying, that's one of our symbols of closure. And I think music speaks to all
those emotions. And that is another reason why music is very alive in our culture even now, not only the Killooleet culture, but culture as a whole and why it’s very important.

*Fire crackling, a final campfire song from the old recording.*

**Mary Wesley:** You’ve been listening to the voices of Tony Seeger, Kate Seeger, and Dean Spencer, in addition to *Sounds of Camp* and *Songs of Camp* from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

As the events of 2020 continue to unfold the Folklife Center’s *Listening in Place* project is an ongoing effort to maintain and cultivate community, listen to others, and document our extraordinary daily lives together during the pandemic and beyond.

If you’d like to learn more about making your own recordings or doing your own interviews within your family, household or community, head to our website at [www.vtfolklife.org/listening](http://www.vtfolklife.org/listening) to learn more. If you so chose, the recordings you make could be added to the VFC archive and become part of our time machine, allowing future Vermonters to revisit and learn from what we’re going through, now.

*Cello music.*

This fall we’re offering several free, virtual workshops via Zoom that introduce the *Listening in Place* project and its many activities, including one coming up on Nov. 14 that offers training on how to record interviews with your family and loved ones. This can be a way to stay connected during the upcoming holidays when we may not be able to gather as much as we’d like.

From all of us here at the VFC we hope you and your families are keeping as well as can be. We’ll be sharing more stories from our *Listening in Place* project through this podcast and also on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. You can follow us [@vermontfolklife](https://twitter.com/vermontfolklife).

Thanks to Smithsonian Folkways for permission to use selections from *Sounds of Camp* and *Songs of Camp* in this episode. You can find both albums -- as well as the entire Smithsonian Folkways catalog at [folkways.si.edu](http://folkways.si.edu). Finally, a huge thanks to Kate, Dean, Tony and all the Killooleet campers who sang in the virtual campfire! You can find the full video of the virtual sing, along with some photos and other goodies in our show notes at [www.vtfolklife.org/untapped](http://www.vtfolklife.org/untapped).

*Cello music.*

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VT Untapped is produced by me, Mary Wesley. Abra Clawson was an assistant producer on this episode. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. The cello music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey. Thanks for listening.

Sounds of fire and cello swell and fade out.