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Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
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Transcript:

My name is Raine Geoghan and I am a writer. I've actually grown up listening to tales about hop picking. So, for example my mum's side of the family, my granny and grandfather, all came to Bishops Frome to hop pick. My granny was hop picking here since the 1920s, I believe they first started off in Bromstree, then they ended up at Five Bridges, but it was Bishops Frome that I heard over and over again. And my mum would often tell me tales about the hop picking, how it was the best time of her life, my granny would talk about farmer John Pudge and how good he was to all the Romany travellers. And so, when I started looking at my next project to write about, my mentor said to me, 'why don't you write about your Romany family, Raine?' and I've been doing that for the last year. And it's amazing because the more I look into it the more information that comes up. So I've got sort of stories about, you know, mum's family, aunts have told me things. I've even put sometime on Facebook and I've had responses from the Romany Heritage site. And I've come along today with not only their stories and their oral testimonies, but also a small collection of my own work. So, I've written poems, monologues, short prose and what I've tried to do is capture that sort of timeless feeling about what it was like in the hop fields. You know, what sort of things did they cook, what did they get up to.

And what is sort of rather special for me is the fact that my mum met my dad in the hop fields. My dad came from the Welsh valleys, his name was Jim, James Hill, and my mum was called Phyllis Lane and they met in 1954 that was and that was the last year they did the hop picking. And then my mum arrived and I was born in 1956. Sadly, my dad died in 1957 of a kidney disease. But I find it interesting in that when I come back here I have a real emotional connection with this place. So not only do I get excited about what all the travellers were doing, they used to go and drink at the Green Dragon and the fun they had and the singing and dancing, and the playing of musical instruments, and that's my sort of connection with it. I've never hop picked, I'm not really that sort of person, I'm not really a gardener or anything like that. But I have been able to listen and just get this feeling of what a lovely place Bishops Frome is, a special place, so that's why I was so eager to share what I have been doing.

My family were traditional Romany travellers, my granny was born in Hanworth in a place called Fell's Yard. Her father, my great

grandfather had a small plot of land there and quite a few wagons and also a railway sleeper that her brother had for his family. And my mum was born in the wagon and my Auntie Mary as well, two of them born in the wagon, and this was in Hammells in Middlesex, so at that time there were quite a few Romany travellers that had settled there and it was a time when it was quite rural unlike how it is today. And then my Granny and grandfather were offered a brand-new council house and I've actually got a poem about that because it was quite a big thing to move from a wagon, a vardo, into a house. But my mum was 14 when they moved into a house.

And going back, my great grandfather, John Ripley, was born in Kent under a gooseberry bush, this is true, and I've written about that as well. So, what I've tried to do is write about things I think are quite interesting. So, my grandfather, his side were horse dealers in London, and his dad Curly Lane, was a barrow boy and I only found out recently for some reason they moved up from London to Birmingham to a place called Cawley, or near Cawley, and spent quite a bit of time there. But the Lanes and the Ripleys were very close. So, for example, my granny Amy and grandfather Alfie they sort of married brother and sister so. It's a bit confusing. Grandfather's sister Ria, married granny's brother, Sammy. So, where we lived, because I lived with my granny and grandfather for about four or five years after my dad died, with my mum and my sister at a place, Winslow Way, Hanworth. And so, one family was down one end of the road and our family was at the other end of the road, and we were all very close. And even now we have got second cousins, distant cousins, we have that same sort of enthusiasm for you know our ancestry, our upbringing. And of course, Romany language was spoken, and something I've been trying to relearn and look at the origins of that language. So, some of my work that I have written I've brought in some of the Romany language as well. Yeah, so that is my background. My other side obviously is from South Wales and I've got the Irish ancestry as well.

So, you've asked me about this think about marriage, going back to when my Auntie Mary married my uncle Jimmy, I think it was just before my mum met my dad, or it was about the same time, but they wanted to get married. He was what's called a gorja, which is a non-Romany. My grandfather didn't like that one bit plus Auntie Mary was quite young and for some reason they used to call Uncle Jimmy Spirit Boy. I still don't know exactly why they called him that, but maybe it was like they didn't want a non-Romany in the family. But anyway, my grandfather eventually gave up and they married because Uncle Jimmy was Irish and my granny loved the Irish, so that was done. So, when my mum met my dad here, my dad was, he came up from the valleys, near Tredegar, where I was actually born in 1966, he came up with this mates because there was no work in the valleys. He did actually train as a pastry chef. But he didn't have work so they came up to do one hop picking season and he met my mum. My

dad was called James, but Jim for short, but James Hill, my mum Phyllis. And he met my mum in the hop fields. My dad was a pole puller and my mum was a hop picker and they fell in love straight away, and it's not surprising because my mum was really beautiful and my dad was really handsome, filmstarish, lovely brown eyes and my mum said she loved the way he spoke with a Welsh lilting accent.

They fell in love and there wasn't any sort of real antagonism towards them because again my granny and grandfather seemed to like the Welsh as well and they loved Jimmy, they thought he was such a lovely young man so they welcomed him really, but they could only, but my grandfather was quite strict, so it was only Friday night they could go out courting. And my mum's cousin, Beccy, used to go out with another Welsh man, so they would get all dressed up and my grandfather would say, 'you get back at this time', and they would just walk around the village or go and have a drink outside the pub that sort of thing. Anyway they fell in love here in the hop fields. And they they got married, and that was in 1954 and I was born in 1956. And sadly, my dad died in 1957 and we came back from Wales and we went to live with my granny and grandfather in the house in Hanworth. My sister was born, because when my dad died my mum was expecting my sister, and she didn't know she was expecting until she went to the doctors because she wasn't well. So, Bev was born in the house in Hanworth. And again, we grew up, we had dogs and pheasants, and chickens, and rabbits and a tortoise, and we grew up with that family until my mum remarried when my mum was seven. So, I was part of that family. And sadly, it affected my mum quite deeply because she never ever got over losing my dad. And I can see that, she died some years ago, but I can understand why. So yeah, it's a special place, it's like a love story isn't it really.

Well both my great grannies were, I haven't got a picture of my grandfather's mum, but her name was Phyllis my mum was named after her, but my mum's friend Mavis tells me, I'm just digressing but I'll come onto my other granny, so Phillis Lane she used to wear little boots and like a bowler hat and very long skirts and petticoat and she just walked everywhere. She would never get on a bus, but again a real character, walking round the streets, everyone knew who she was. And same with my great granny, she was a very strong woman. You can see in her cheek bones. Yeah, my granny thought the world of her and often talked of her. My great Granny used to call my mum the plum pudding girl because, I don't know if you know about the Romany's but they used to make puddings, they called them plum puddings, bacon puddings and it would be all suet wrapped in a cloth and popped in a boiling pot of water and people called it gypsy grub. So, my mum would go over to their place and they ended up buying when they moved out of the wagon, they bought a little bungalow, and my mum would go over on a Friday night and my great granny would make a plum pudding for my mum and give

her sixpence and they were very very close, they had a hard life travelling around in the wagons. And as I said my dad's dad was born in Kent actually under a gooseberry bush on the way to strawberry pick in the middle of nowhere. And I wrote a piece about this I thought it was pretty amazing. So yes, quite sort of interesting characters and spoke a lot of Romany and had very very strict rules about how to bring up children, very very strict families. Both my grannies and grandfather, you know what to wear and what not to wear. And my great grandfather John Ripley was quite hard man and used to beat my granny if for example he told her to go out and sell the flowers and if she spent any of the money, they called money poshes then, 'if you spend any poshes Amy I'll beat you'. And she used to go out and of course she got carried away. My granny Amy always loves bright colours and clothes and shoes and she ended up buying things out of the money out of the profit. And so, she'd get back and she'd have to hide from her dad. So just a little indication of what it was like.

RAINE IS EXPLAINING ABOUT ONE OF HER PHOTOGRAPHS

So, this one I know is in Bishops Frome in one of the hop fields, great granny Amy and my great aunt Vera standing on either side of the crib pulling hops, looks more or less bare, looks like it is the end of the season, so that's that one. So, this one they are sitting, all sitting outside the front of their tent. This time they are posing, that one before they weren't. but this one they are all smiling. My great uncle Tommy has got his arms crossed and he was quite an amazing character, he liked betting on the horses, and he and Vera sold flowers outside Windsor Castle and met some very interesting people. And then my great granny again and this time and this time she's smiling and she looks so much softer here. And a distant cousin Linda, so that's that one. Obviously my mum was born in a vardo, this one is a vardo, Uncle Alfie, he's her baby brother, and that's my granny Amy sitting just inside the vardo there. Think they had been out for the day and came across this vardo which was exactly like their one. So they had a photograph taken. This one I think is in Kent actually and it's a group of hop pickers and fruit pickers and my mum and my mum's cousin Ria are at the back there. And you can see they're all, some lovely camaraderie there. they are all happy and smiling. Which is I think the whole thing about hop picking, they were all happy to do it. And believe me I know the Romanies worked very hard and they were the best pickers, I was told that. And that's my granny, it's a very old magazine, we don't which magazine this came from but she's photographed here with her barrow of flowers about to get on the train to Waterloo to Nine Elms market where she would, sorry, she's probably just got off because all her flowers are there, where she would buy all her flowers, then come back and sell them for the following two days and she would wear a blue money belt around her waist and she always sold out. And that's granny in her front garden where she used to live. That's the

house she moved to when mum was 14 and she lived there for the rest of her life. And that's another one in the hop fields in Bishops Cleeve I believe with my granny and distant cousins, Owen, Linda and Aunt Vera and again you can see that very strong facial features and the way she is holding the hops there, the way they're posing for the camera. So that's the selection of photos I've bought.

Yeah, so, after a long day of hop picking what they would do, some of the men would jump on the back of cart and literally just come straight down to the Green Dragon. Some of them would go to the Chase but the Green Dragon was their favourite pub, and that's where they congregated. Now I've heard many things about the pub. One from the landlord who was there about five years ago, when I came up with my husband and he reminded me, 'cause the old landlord and he told him about it, and in the olden days when all the Romany travellers used to go up to drink they would fill a bath outside the pub of beer, and the men would go and get their tankards or glasses or whatever, and they would go out and fill their glasses with the beer, it would be running down their front, their clothing, dribbling, they would just be drinking because they were so thirsty, and the other thing they used to do sometimes would be to call in the local constabulary because not all the Romany families and not all the non-Romany travellers would become unruly, but there were a couple of families that were notorious and when they were coming up here and if word got out, the local constabulary were called in to just come in and keep the peace, keep an eye on things. And I thought yeah, I can understand that.

Now my family, particularly on a Friday night, what they would do, the whole family would come up, not just the men, but the women and children too. Very often, like my mum had a lovely voice, she would often, my grandfather would say, 'go on my filly. Jump up on the table, give us a song.' And so she would, a song is called gillie, I think it may be the same in Scotland, but in Romany it's call gillie, give us a gillie. So she would jump off on the table and she would sing a song and everyone would join in, somebody would be playing the fiddle, my grandfather would play the harmonica. Somebody else would be playing the accordion and it would be a big party. And as I grew up with Romany people I know there is one thing they know how to do and that is enjoy themselves, so they like storytelling, they like song, they like music, they like dancing. I think that is one of the reasons my mum often said, because she met my dad there and fell in love, but that was the best time of her life. That you would work hard, really hard but you would also enjoy yourself. I'll tell you one song they did used to sing. Just let me think of the words and the tune:

RAINE SINGING

'If I had my life to live over,

I would still fall in love with you,

'We would walk down the lane
with a happy refrain.

Da da da da da da...

'I'll meet you when schooldays are over
I will walk down the lane once again

'If I had my life to live over
I would still fall in love with you.

That was my grannie's favourite song. I just couldn't remember
all the words.

RAINE SINGING

'I'm a true didiki.....

Oh, hang on, I've forgotten it now. Ah, sorry, I'll start again.
Oh, hang on, I'll start again.

'I'm a Romany rai,
A true didiki,
I leave all my houses beneath the blue sky

'I live in a tent,
I don't pay no rent
And that's why they call me a Romany rai.

And I'm sorry I've forgotten the second line. But that's the
song they all sang, and then there was the chorus, and it went
on and on, I don't know the chorus.

A didiki is somebody that's half Romany and half Gorja, and
Gorja is half Romany, so I am a didiki. It's a lovely word. I
don't know if you know much about the Romany language but
because I've been doing a lot of research, it actually comes
from the ancient Indian languages Sanskrit and Hindi as well,
Hindi/Punjabi. But some of the words are just beautiful and I
would like to read a couple of my pieces and I've got a few
Romany words in there.

So I've got a few of my poems here that have been inspired by
the hop picking and particularly at Bishops Frome and you'll
notice that I've actually mentioned Bishops Frome in a couple of
poems:

The way of the gypsy – Amy Lane

'Amy took off her coat,
untied her money belt

looked at her daughter who had a hoola hoop at her feet.

'make me some meski child in a sandwich
I'm famished and full of dust.

Jellon.

'she'd had a good day
she had sold all the flowers,
even the dahlias that were past their best

'her back ached,
her peeros were sore
but she was smiling.

'she was slowly growing accustomed to the house
the big rooms,
windows that needed cleaning every day.

'she wasn't sure about the neighbours
especially the one with all the cats
she seemed to look down her nose at Amy

'she missed the vardo,
cooking on the fire in the open torbo

'thank the blessed lord we're going hop picking
she said under her breath,
two more weeks and they'll be off
to Bishops Frome in beautiful Herefordshire.

The table in the hops field in Bishops Frome:

'we got to the hop fields just as the sun was coming up.
We walked across the pooe and there was our aunt Amy,
Pouring panny from the kettle into the big brown teapot

'she'd covered the table with a while lace cloth
and had laid out her best china crockery

'here you are my gals, come and have a bit of breakfast
and a nice cup of mesky.

'me sister and I couldn't help but laugh.
The table looked so funny in the middle of nowhere.

'now listen here, we've got to pick a lot of hops today
and earn ourselves some poshes.
We sat on the red check blanket,
the grass still wet from the morning's dew

'she gave us bread, cheese

and a cup of sweet meski.

'she put her hands on her hips
and looked around as if she was waiting for someone.

'here he is, bout time too.
It was our Uncle Tommy come all the way from ???
I knew with him helping we'd pick a load of hops

'He comes striding across the pooe
a big smile on his face, his Tribly on and his waistcoat all
buttoned up.
He always did look smart.
'Well ain't this cushty Amy, you made yourself at home I see
What a lovely spread.
'don't seem that long ago that we were on rations Tom
and you know me, I do like a good piece of grub.'

So this is a poem really based on my granny. She often used to
go into the front garden and pick bluebells, and um, yes, it's
called, 'A memory of the hop fields'

'she's in the front garden bending low
picking bluebells
wearing her old red apron
with the Spanish dancer on the front

'she stands up rubbing her lower back her mind shaping a memory.
The hop fields, her mother lean, strong, picking hops as quick
as a squirrel,
her ???? in plaits tied on top of her head,
her gold hoops pulling her ears down
ruddy cheeks, dry cracked lips

'her father pulling poles,
sweating, smiling,
his gold tooth for all to see

'at the end of a long day
she would stand on top of an apple crate
comb his hair, kiss his neck tasting of salt

'he would pick her up,
swing her high then low
and say, you're the prettiest little chai there ever was.'

And the next one, the last one, is 'the table in the hop fields
in Bishops Frome'. And this one was recently told to me by my
mum's cousin Shirley, about the time, she was about 14, had
come down to Bishops Frome and she had seen my granny has put a
lace cloth over the table and this is her story.

'we got to the hop fields just as the sun was coming up

we walked across the poove and there was our Aunt Amy
Pouring panny from the kettle into the big brown teapot

'she'd covered the table with a white lace cloth
and had laid out her best china crockery

'here you are my gals, come and have a bit breakfast
and a nice cup of mesky.

'me sister and I couldn't help but laugh.
The table looked so funny in the middle of nowhere.

'now listen here, we've got to pick a lot of hops today
earn ourselves some pohses.
We sat on the red checked blanket
the grass still wet from the morning's dew

'she gave us bread, cheese
and a cup of sweet meski.

'she put her hands on her hips
and looked around as if she was waiting for someone

'here he is, bout time too.
It was our Uncle Tommy come all the way from ????.
I knew with him helping we'd pick a load of hops

'He comes striding across the poove
a big smile on his face, his Tribly on and his waistcoat all
buttoned up.
He always did look smart.
'Well well, ain't this cushty Amy, you made yourself at home I
see
What a lovely spread.
'It don't seem that long ago that we were on rations Tom
and you know me, I do like a good bit of grub.'
'he kissed her cheek, bent down
tickled us gals and made us giggle
One by one the rest of our people joined us,
More out of curiosity than anything else,
They were just as amused as my sister and me.

'we all knew Aunt Amy liked to do her own thing
we never knew what the next thing might be

'hungry finches waiting for crumbs
as we ate our grub

'a bell rings
it's hopping time.'

In some of these poems I've used Romany words and in this one,
poove means field, panny is water, meski is tea, poshes is momey,

and cushti is very nice, the other poem is bell, which is hair and chai which is daughter or child.

Step dancing is something that all the Romany travellers, well not all of them, but a lot of them used to do and still do now. I've actually got a memory about when I was in a pub in Walton with some of my mum's cousins, there was Mushy and Tommy. And I'd taken my tap shoes over to give them a bit of a tap dance because my granny said, put your tap shoes in the bag. But when we got there they had a board behind the bar and they brought the board out and one of my mum's cousins started to do step dancing. Now step dancing is like tap dancing and a lot of the men do it actually and you know it's using the ball and the toe of the foot and it's doing this little rhythmical sort of thing and the arms going like this. And they used to do it here in Bishops Cleeve. They used to have a board in the wagon or the van or something, they'd bring it out and one by one the members of the family would get on the board and people would clap them along. And they used to take it up outside the pub. And after they'd had a bit of a sing song they'd come on my gal, and they'd have a dance and stand on the board, put their proper shoes on and do a little step dance.

It's interesting because if you think where Romanies come from in India, and many years ago I used to do Indian cassak dance, cassack, which is you put the bells around your ankles it's again bare feet but you are tapping your feet on the floor. and then if you think about the flamenco, so you have the Indian, the gypsies, the flamenco dancers, again doing that, and then you've got the step dancing here. I guess I suppose you've also got the Morris dancing and all sort of folk dancing. But it's something the gypsies do. I recently heard that one young guy is apparently the UK champion of step dancing, but it is something they all love to do. Granny used to sometimes pull her skirts up when she'd had a few too many whiskeys and she'd say, 'give order' and she'd move into the floor and she'd do this little step dance. And that was great fun.

Raine demonstrating step dancing!

Sometimes people would have fiddles, obviously a big part of the Romany tradition, and the harmonica, but obviously the accordion was used more for ballads and things, folky songs. But nine out of ten times they just danced because it's that sort of rhythm that they get and the sound of the shoe against the board, which is quite important. They did also, and I must say this, they liked a lot of Irish music and Irish songs, always very popular.

(Music) would be around the camp fire. part of Romany culture is being spontaneous and if they are in a good mood and if they've had a good week they would have a sing song and the instruments would come out and they would encourage each other to sing. And they would have pleasure in that, there was not much competitiveness in their creativity, but a mutual sharing of

things.

Skimished, yeah, I love that word don't you, it's got something about it, skimished. My granny would often say, oh we went down to, she used to call the pub the beer shop, to the beer shop and we all stood outside and we all got skimished, didn't we Alf, or didn't we Phyll. A lot of words have that Indian influence, so yeah.

So skirmished means getting drunk so we're outside the beer shop and we all got skirmished, or what a load of whiskey we had, we're all Skimished. Yeah.

The general word for food is hobben, obviously I have a limited vocabulary because I don't actually speak the language at the moment but I'm relearning some of these languages. So something like hedgehog they would have had. The word for hedgehog is hotchy witchy also called hotchy and some people called jog jog as well. And then you'd have rabbit. They'd often have rabbit stew, they loved their rabbit stew and that was called sushu. So there's all these different types of words for food and drinks and things like that.

The old farmer Pudge, whom I believe is called John Pudge, because my granny used to tell me about him and I also have a tape which we also had made into a CD, we play it occasionally, an oral testimony, well she thought the world of him and she said he thought the world of her family, you know. She would say, 'oh the old farmer pudge, he thought the world of us. he used to bring us a sack of potatoes down in the huts, and a bale of straw to make our beds up, and sometimes eggs, and we did all our own cooking. And on Friday nights sometimes we would go up there, and he had a house by the hop kilns, and she said, you know, he would give us a sub if we were a bit short, he was very good. And he did like the Lanes and the Ripleys and he knew they'd come back year after year but he knew that they were good hop pickers, that was the thing. They worked hard for him and he helped them along. And I think that sort of mutual feeling, there was a mutual feeling there.

I think I mentioned that I belong to the Romany heritage site, I joined the Romany heritage site on Facebook and I told them that I was coming up here and I sort of mentioned Bishops Frome and I had lots of comments about hop picking all over the country, but there was one guy called George Painter and he said that in the early fifties he spent a lot of time here in the hop fields in Bishops Frome, he said : 'the memories that I have are of me and my twin sister taking a white enamel bucket with a lid to the pump in the village to fill it with water as there was no water, electric or gas in the old bungalows we used to stay in. We were aged about five or six.' So that was one of the comments I had, but there were many more telling me about a painter called Alfred Munnings who used to paint pictures, beautiful photos of

families. He went out in the Hampshire countryside in 1913 and he also went further afield, and he took photos of horse drawn caravans and hop pickers so that was interesting.

And I'll finish up if its ok with you on a little story about my granny, Amy Lane, when she came here when she was quite young at 19 so that was in 1931. I think I've got that right but she said her father, my great grandfather, he said to her, go down to the vicar, Amy, and see if he'll marry you and Alfie, because he could see my granny and Alfie were in love. So she went down to the church here in Bishops Frome and she had a word with him. And he, the vicar here, said no, I can't marry you I'm afraid because he said we've had a few traveling families that have caused some problems so we've had to say no to any more Romany weddings. And she said they were very upset. But she said to him, I understand. And she said that her family were good pickers they worked fast, and as soon as their bushels were ready for counting. And there was one time the family put in 42 bushels in one time! So that's it.

In the end they married in Middlesex in the Registry Office, and they went into the pub and had a little celebration drink and went into one of the cinemas and ended up there for the evening. We live in this era where a lot of the old traditional things are no more. We've got machines. Life has changed so much over the last hundred years. So, I think it's really important to capture these stories, to share them, to share them with our children and our grandchildren, and to bring these characters to life because we'll never see the likes of them again.