



Weston Voices

The Oral History Project of the Weston Historical Society

An Interview with Fred Hellerman

Part I: April 5, 2016

Fred Hellerman was known world-wide as a folk singer, guitarist, producer, and song writer. He was also an original members of The Weavers, one of the most famous and influential folk groups of the last half of the 20th century, writing or co-writing some of their greatest hits.

Accused, along with the rest of The Weavers, of having Communist sympathies, he and the group were blacklisted during the McCarthy era and unable to perform on television, radio, or in most music halls. The group broke up in 1952 as a result, but resumed singing in 1955. They continued together until 1963 (with changes in personnel). The Weavers held several reunion concerts in 1980s, documented in the film, "The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time!"

Hellerman was also known for producing Arlo Guthrie's hit record album "Alice's Restaurant" (1967) and wrote, backed, or produced for many other well-known performers, Joan Baez and Harry Belafonte among them. Hellerman has been interviewed extensively but an overview of his career by Bruce Eder can be found on the "All Music" website.

Ken Edgar, a Trustee of the Weston Historical Society, conducted two interviews with Fred in the Spring of 2016. The first focused largely on Hellerman's childhood in Brooklyn, his musical and political influences, and the start of The Weavers. In the second interview Fred was joined by his wife Susan Lardner and together they talked about coming to live in Weston in 1968 to join the many other creative people from New York already here. They also shared more reminiscences about Fred's career. This transcript encompasses both interviews, edited and annotated for clarity. The complete videos, as well as a special 'highlights' version, are available on the Society's website.

The Weston Historical Society is deeply grateful to Fred and Susan for making this interview possible; it was likely his last before his death on September 1, 2016 at the age of 89.

Ken Edgar: I am Ken Edgar, here to interview long time Weston resident Fred Hellerman on behalf of the Weston Historical Society.

We are sitting in Fred's wonderful living room on Good Hill Road in Weston, Connecticut. Fred, as you'll discover, is one of our more famous residents. As a result of his long career in the arts, he's best known for his singing, his guitar playing, his song writing, his movie producing and several other things he's lesser known for, but he'll plead guilty to.

Fred, it's an honor and a pleasure for us to be with you today and help you to record your oral history. Thank you for doing it.

Fred: You're very welcome, but I haven't done it yet. [laughter]

Ken: Let's start at the beginning. Tell us about where you were born and your growing up in New York City.

Fred: I was born in 1927 and grew up in Brooklyn, which was a wonderful town even then, in the 1930's. It was a great place to grow up in and a great town -- as history has proven. My father came to this country from Latvia. My mother was born in Jersey city. My father was in the woolen sweater business.

My father had a couple of people working for him and he would go around to these sweater factories to take the remnants of the stuff that was cut from the patterns, put them into burlap bags and bring them over to Williamsburg where he had an operation. It was a small thing in a factory like setting. There were two or three black women that he hired. All day they would be sitting there sorting out all the fragments by color, by design, etc. All kinds of things went into it.

All day long they would sit and listen to the radio. This was in the 30's. They would be listening to the pop music of the day: Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and Bing Crosby. That was the music that they were hearing all day. Sometimes in the summertime when I would be working for my father, doing all kinds of things, this was the music that I was listening to also [and would be a major influence]. I didn't think anything of it at the time; it was the most natural thing in the world for me to be listening to it. That is the music that I grew up with.

Now, the fact is that as I was growing up in Brooklyn I didn't have any friends. I didn't have a friend in the world, or in Brooklyn. [laughter] Then later, I finally did make a friend, his name was Abby. He was a painter. He wasn't a musician or anything, but he was a painter, a very good

painter. He was the only friend I had. A guy, who, I really liked and I got very connected to him until I was about 12. A little more than that, maybe 13 or 14 even.

I remember one Saturday he couldn't be found. He wasn't anywhere around. I was determined to find him. So, I found him and he was babysitting. So that Saturday night, I went there. I walked into this very nice apartment where he was babysitting. I walked in and the place was filled with records; there were records all over the place. Music was playing, and I'm trying to listen to what's going on. I'm hearing all kind of things that were very strange things coming out of a phonograph. What I'm hearing from the record is:

[sings and claps]

"What is it I see yonder coming, coming, coming, what is it I see yonder coming, coming, coming. Get on board. Get on board. It's that union train a coming, coming, coming. It's that union train a coming, coming. It's a union train a coming, coming, coming. Get on board, get on board, get on board, get on board."

What's that? Then there's another record and that's a song about Jim Crow. There's another song...something else. You put it together you get the idea. "Join that Union". That's it.

[sings]

"If you want higher wages let me tell you what to do. You've got to talk to the workers in the shop with you. You gotta feel that...bah, bah, da...and if you all get together boys it won't be long. You get higher wages [claps] You get better conditions"

It's like these are our records. [laughs] I didn't know what the song was about. I have to talk about how it relates to all of that and how it built this social awareness for me. Which is a great deal. Because, remember it was in the time of the Spanish Civil War [July, 1936 - April 1, 1939].

I remember I was in elementary school at the time. I remember somebody said to the teacher, "You know we see here in the papers all the time about all this fighting and going on in Spain. What's that all about?"

(By the way I have to tell of my earliest political thought of which I was aware. One of my earliest memories, I probably couldn't have been more than six, seven, or eight, was hearing [claps rhythmically and sings]

"Herbert Hoover! Rah! Rah! Rah! Put him in the ash can! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Now this was the early 30's [*Hoover was president from 1929 to 1933. - ed.*.]

Anyway, I remember one of the kids asked the teacher, "What's this thing about the Spanish Civil War?" The teacher said, "Can you imagine if we had an election here and the Democrats won the election and everybody was all in favor of that. Then all the ones who lost in the election they didn't accept their defeat there, and so they had militia come in and take over. That's what was happening in Spain. Spain and you have the ones who were..."

Ken: The [Spanish] Republicans and the Fascists.

Fred: There you go. As if it were the Democrats and the Republicans.

Ken: How did that affect you?

Fred: It affected me in the sense that I understood a lot about politics. [laughs] There was a lot to understand about politics for a kid at that age. When I was a little bit older, maybe 15 or 16 I was talking with my father. He was a wonderful man. I deeply loved him. He really left a mark on me. He had come here from Latvia. He made his way to the world very modestly.

[I should add that] also at that time in New York City you couldn't help but be conscious. You had wars and you had Hitler coming up and all kinds of things. I remember on street corners you had all kinds politicians. It was a very exciting time. All the bad guys are up there and the good guys.

Anyway... in the City Council they had all kinds of political people running for office. One [ballot] line in all that they had the Communist Party there. I said to my father, "Dad, who are you voting for in the election?"

My father said, "You know, I've thought about that a lot and I finally did come up with an answer." I go, "Oh what was that? Did you vote for Peter Cacchione?" ¹

I still remember Peter Caccione. He was a wonderful, wonderful, politician but he ran on the Communist ticket. I said, "No no, who are you [really] going to vote for?" He said, "Well, I thought about it very seriously and I finally decided even though it was very much against my class interest, I decided I had to vote for Peter Cacchiono. He is clearly the better guy."

It brings tears to my eyes when I think of it. It was so moving to me even then...and I never...

Ken: So that was obviously a big influence on you.

Fred: Huge.

Ken: I want to move forward to your time in the Coast Guard, which you joined right out of high school.

Fred: What happened was that I was approaching being drafted at that time into the Army. I thought, "Gee, you know, I may want to join the Coast Guard instead of joining the muddy Army." [laughs] Especially since my older brother was in the Coast Guard already. So I did that. It was quite an experience, because number one, it was strange. You had to report for boot-camp. I was assigned to Manhattan Beach, Sheep's Head Bay I was immediately put into learning Morse code. They made me into a radio operator...

Ken: Yes. I remember you told me last time you could still remember the Morse code.

Fred: Absolutely. My name is [*voices and taps out the code for his name: dot-dot-dash-dot, dot-dash-dot, dot, dash-dot-dot -ed.*] . I remember Morse code very well. Well...not very well because I find that sometimes on the radio you hear some weird interference with slow Morse code. I can send it, but I can't read it very well. I [*reached*] fantastic speeds with it. I remember when I had to report for my first thing in radio school. They sat me down. They said, "OK. You're going to learn Morse code. First "A" [*voices and taps out: dot-dash*], then "B" [*voices and taps out dash-dot-dot-dot*]," and so on.

I did that for six months. I became very, very good. What was true, though, is that most of the radio operators were very musically orientated, aside from being musicians maybe, maybe not. They're all very well modulated. After that I was in the Coast Guard.

I was assigned to Boston and I reported up there to the Coast Guard headquarters after a week or two of leave. Before I knew it I was shoved into a car and zap!... out to the Boston Navy Yard. They threw me on to the ship. Before I [*even*] got both feet onto the ship it was off and away. They were sitting there waiting for me. They needed me. They needed a radio operator. I can't remember what year it was. I remember it was a day in October. It was a beautiful sunny, sunny day. The water was like Jell-O. Not a ripple. Not a wave. I never saw anything like it, either before or since. The most incredible thing I've ever seen in the ocean.

Immediately we were on our way to Trinidad, which was going to be the first stop. After Trinidad we were going further south to Recife, Brazil, which was a port in Pernambuco. We would be at sea for thirty days and then in port for thirty days. When we would come into it we'd be met by a whole string of small boats led by a lot of very attractive [laughs] women. All the way coming in they'd be there. They'd be singing and whistling and think... [laughs]

[Here Fred looks directly at the camera and with a twinkle in his eyes "demonstrates" what the women were doing by pulling up his cardigan to reveal his shirt and suspenders. -ed.]

We had to go ashore every night, or every day, whatever. These girls would come up to us. They'd throw their arms around you. They're rubbing themselves up against you. It was like a benediction almost: "Jesus Christ. I love you like crazy baby. No shit." [He repeats the gesture.] [laughter] That's was the benediction. [laughter] "Jesus Christ. I love you like crazy baby. No shit."

Ken: Very romantic.

Fred: Very romantic.

Ken: Can you tell us what you did in the Coast Guard and what your mission was? If it wasn't top secret at this point.

Fred: No. We would go out. Our patrol would be 30 days in port and 30 days at sea [and ranged along the coasts of both North and South America]. It would take us a few days to get out to our station. And we would go there and we would see this ship that we were relieving. There was no problem. At other times we were stationed up north of that. Up to the Arctic Circle.

That was a lot different. It would be January, February, with thirty foot waves. There were areas where several months before one of the Coast Guard ships had capsized. You'd see the ship that you were relieving and it was like watching a matchbox in a washing machine. You'd say, "My God. How horrible to survive this." I was never so frightened in my life. You had to lash yourself into your chair or your cots, otherwise you'd be tossed around in there. It was frightening, really frightening.

Ken: You have mentioned that a lot of your assignments had to do with the weather and testing the weather [by launching weather balloons].

Fred: Yeah. What happened was the ship we were on was about the size of a destroyer, a relatively short ship. We would see what we were leaving. It was terrifying, really. It was the most frightening thing that happened to me in the service. That's all I was able to do for the war.
[laughter]

Ken: Was your assignment to monitor the weather balloons?

Fred: Yeah. What would happen was ... This was another frightening moment. When we left Boston, and this beautiful thing out there, and we were out for maybe a half hour, someone would come in and hand us some papers. I'd say, "What would I do with this?" They'd say, "Oh, when your shift is off, ship this off to Washington. Then we can give you weather reports."

Being fresh out of school, one of the first things you learned when you were at sea, you don't open radios. There are ships around you that have all been torpedoed. You can hear them. That was pretty terrifying when you realized this is what you were going to be doing.

What they told you, though, was that it was really the safest place you could be because the U-Boats needed the information just as much. Yeah. They were listening to everything, but that's what they needed. It was a perfectly safe place to be.

I loved being at sea all that time....

Ken: Music. What was your first instrument that you ever played.

Fred: The first instrument that I ever played was the ukulele. I went out and bought a ukulele because I wanted to learn how to play music. I learned that the ukulele was tuned. I can't remember the notes now but they were tuned to [sings], "Ba-ba-ba-ba. My dog has fleas." I don't know if that's familiar to you. [laughs] Then I began to figure out fingerings, because that was very easy to figure out.

Then [when I got] aboard ship I found a little room--more like a closet--that nobody on board, including the Captain, knew about. I would hole myself up in there. I would say to myself, "I want to learn something about this." There was a guitar in there. Well, you couldn't really call it a guitar. It had a neck that had some strings on it. You didn't know what the hell they were. Nobody on aboard ship could help you with it. So I took it one day and I went [to play] this thing. I went, " [mimics strumming the strings] ." It sort of sounded like, " [inaudible]." I took one note, "Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba."

Then I hit another which was terrible. I tuned it until it sounded like something, something that you could listen to. Then I found another one, and another. Now I had four strings that were related to each other. Somehow I had figured out enough to say, "That's a chord." Now I went, "[strums in rhythm] ." I began to sing. [sings beginning of "Oh! Susanna"]

Fred: I had to find the different chord to go with where [the song went]. Then I found not only that but four notes went into that one chord. So I could play a hundred songs that I know of. Oh, boy, that was a discovery.

Ken: Were you entirely self-taught on the guitar?

Fred: Completely self-taught. Once I learned the thing it opened a whole new world. Of course I was also picking up books and learning a lot. And if I would see someone else with a guitar, boy, I wouldn't let them off. I'd be asking them a million questions. It went on from there.

Ken: When you got back from the war you went to college?

Fred: When I got back from the war I went back to Brooklyn College. I loved it. I *loved* it. By any standard it was a wonderful school. I loved it there.

Ken: How about musically? Did you start playing there?

Fred: Musically what happened was [that I] was very politically minded. A lot of kids in Brooklyn College were of left wing or liberal conscience. Then, after a while, [when they heard me playing] they'd say, "Hey, look. We're having this meeting. Why don't you come and sing us a song or two?" I knew a song or two.

That's when I first began performing. Then of course you meet a lot more people. It was also a time when you had a lot of people coming out of the Army or the other services and there were a lot of them who were trying to get back into a band and do their [thing]. They were writing music, performing music, and responding to music.

It was a very artistic community, [including something that] was called People's Songs² and among others it involved Leonard Bernstein. He wasn't *The* Leonard Bernstein then. All kinds of people. You know Paul Robeson...not necessarily all big left wing, but people trying to get into or get back into music. So it was a very active thing. And there was a guy by the name of Lee Hayes. He was a writer, singer, and organizer. He became head of the singing group, People's Songs.

One day I got a postcard from him. I didn't know him. He says, "Dear friend." I even have that postcard. It said, "Dear Fred, I hear that you're a good singer. Why don't come around. Let's get acquainted." That's how I met Lee Hayes. And through Lee Hayes is how I met Pete Seeger. Pete was very active with People's Songs.

Ken: So that was the beginning of *The Weavers*...

Fred: That was the beginning... [So I began to do] a lot of singing with Pete and with Lee. It was a wonderful thing. I'm going to come back to that. Then while I was at Brooklyn College, I remember I got a summer job at sort of a left wing children's camp. I was a musical guy there, playing the guitar, singing some songs, and teaching some songs there.

Ronnie Gilbert was a gal who got a job up there working in the office. A wonderful singer. I knew her from around, maybe from People's Songs. We began singing a lot together. She was a *wonderful* singer. We were very close.

Now we had Lee Hayes and he was beginning to write some songs. [*Sings a few bars*]... it turns out that Lee Hayes was writing songs like that. He's from Arkansas [and that musical tradition]. It then occurred to me that the songs that I was hearing on the phonograph were being written in that style by Lee Hayes. It wasn't Benny Goodman; it was the Baptist church music that Lee was writing to. That's where songs were coming from. And Pete was doing a lot of the early American songs, histories.

So there was Lee and there was Pete. Now there was Ronnie and Fred. That was four of us...that was *The Weavers*.

Then, when *The Weavers* were now a group already, people would be coming up to me and saying, "Where did you get all these wonderful songs that you guys sing?", referring to Pete and Lee and Ronnie and me. "Where do you get these things?"

It never occurred to me that in a lot of the songs we were doing I was bringing a different kind of music, into [the mix] [*i.e. the popular music of his youth -ed.*]...It had never occurred to me that I had some rollers, big rollers, and bringing [it to] all *The Weaver's* stuff. That was stuff that became *The Weavers*. That was a huge, huge realization for me.

Ken: I read that you started out as the *No Name Quartet*.

Fred: Yeah. What was happening was that we were getting offers from groups, from Communist Party meetings, from churches. We never refused anybody. We sang to anyone who wanted to listen to us. We were very happy.

Ken: Your name was the *No Name Quartet*?

Fred: Yeah. We needed a name. The *No Name Quartet*. Every time we went somewhere, we always made up some kind of a name. Then we became *The Weavers*.

Ken: Tell us about that.

Fred: Because we were always saying, "We have to get a name for this," because we were coming up with crazy names constantly. Now here I was at Brooklyn College. At the time I was an English major there. I was taking a course in German drama.

We were assigned to read a play by Gerhart Hauptman, who had just won a Nobel Prize for a play of his called "The Weavers."³ It was this play in which there were these weavers who were on strike and marching from one town to another singing big marching songs, etc. You know, militant songs. That was our assignment.

I remember the next day. We were getting together for our weekly rehearsal. I walked in there with a big smile. I said, "I think I have a name for us." "Oh, yeah? What, what, what?" I said, "How about *The Weavers*?" "Aah!" [laughs] That's where we got the name.

Ken: So it had political significance as well, given the subject matter of the play?

Fred: Oh yeah... I don't like to stress it, but about that time was when *The Weavers* were appearing all over the place and we were doing interviews. The first question at any interview was, "Where did you get the name, *The Weavers*?" Before I had a chance to open my mouth Pete would say, "Oh yeah. Well, I'd read the play by Gerhart Hauptmann."

They'd get that from Pete. Not that...things [weren't] shaky then. [*In the sense that the group was still trying to find its footing professionally. -ed.*] The next thing that happened was [other people] would ask, "Where did you guys get the name, *The Weavers*?" and Lee Hays says, "Oh, well, yeah, I got that, got that from a [Gerhart Hauptmann play]." [laughs ironically] That's not the way it's supposed to be. And, I've never said anything about that.

Ken: That's funny. So, here you are. You finally got the four of you together but it wasn't exactly an immediate success.

Fred: Before we came up with the name we had to struggle but once we had the name, *The Weavers*, that's when we exploded.

Ken: Just before that -- and you can correct me -- you were talking about breaking up. It wasn't working out, and you were going to go to graduate school at the University of Chicago. Tell us a little about that period when you were struggling.

Fred: I'm talking now about before [we got the job at] the Village Vanguard. We were struggling. I remember walking into a rehearsal that we were having, although you could barely call it a rehearsal because we so enjoyed singing with each other. It's such a vivid memory.

Pete used to live in a house down on Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. He had a wife and a new-born baby. I remember I came in, I saw Pete in the other room, and he was stretched out on the bed, he was so beaten. I said, "Pete, what's the matter?" He said "I was sitting here thinking that I have to get a job in a factory, I have a family to support."

Then Lee, who was writing some stories and was getting published only here and there. And Ronnie was thinking of flying out to California to get a job in an office or something. And I had just graduated from Brooklyn College and was accepted at the University of Chicago for some graduate work.

That's what was lying in front of us: desperation. That's when we came up with the idea of trying to see if we could get a job out of Max Gordon, owner of the Village Vanguard. Pete had worked there once before as a solo thing.

We went to Max and he said "OK, listen, why don't you come in next Wednesday and give us an audition." So, we auditioned down there. [*The audition was for a spot performing for the Christmas week of 1949. -ed.*] Apparently we did very well. Nobody said, "Oh boy this is the greatest thing ever..." No. OK. But he said, "It's nice. Well, come in for a month. Yeah, put in four weeks. We'll give you \$200 for the week." \$200 for the whole group, so for \$50 a week we were working there.

[I remember] Max came in one day when Pete was making a hamburger. [*laughs and gestures a very tall one*] He said, "No more hamburgers." [*laughs*] Right across the street was White Castle, or whatever. They were a nickel. We went over there. So the next time we came in we had paper

bags that we would rip very loudly. Max is like, "What is that?" [And Pete said something] like, "...we can't afford your prices, and that sort of thing . [So then Max said,] " Let them have the hamburgers. [laughs]

Ken: That's the Village Vanguard.

Fred: That was the Village Vanguard. Yeah.

Ken: How did you get from there to a recording contract?

Fred: While we were down there, Gordon Jenkins came down to Village Vanguard one night. He was a big band leader.⁴ He just fell in love with us. Every night he was down there. If he didn't show up there, we figured, "Oh. He must be sick."

We'd call his hotel and sure enough he was. He said, "You know, I've got to record this group." Not only that, but of course he's got a whole slew of companies and arrangers and stuff like that. He said, "Why don't you come down to the studio so you can get a sense of things there..."

First, he was a wonderful guy. A wonderful guy. Not a political guy, you know. He knew what he was listening to. If they [*referring to the producer of the recording. -ed.*] made a change, if they changed a note of what we did, Jenkins would say, "No, forget it. Throw it out."

Ken: Tell us about when you first went to the recording studio so they could hear you. There were a group of people listening to you.

Fred: Yeah. At the time Gordon was the big A&R man there [at Decca Records]. He used to be the biggest record seller in the United States. The head man there was Dave Kapp, who, with his brother, was running Decca Records. Gordon was absolutely determined to bring us up there and play for him.

[It was early 1950.] We go up there. We played for Dave. He came in and we sang a song. Then somebody else in his department would come up and listen. After a while the whole place was listening to us. Gordon, he always said, "If I have to pay for it myself, I have to record this one." Anyway, it was a fantastic [musical] arrangement. It came out and five minutes later it was coming out of every store. [laughs]

Ken: That was your first hit?

Fred: Yeah. It was the first mega hit.

Ken: What was the name of that?

Fred: "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena." We put it in his lap. He remained a very, very good friend. At the same recording session we did "Goodnight Irene" and when we finished the guys listening to us--we'd never run across this before--the orchestra got up and gave us applause, which was ... oh, boy.⁵

Ken: Now, all of a sudden, you are stars.

Fred: We're huge stars, huge stars.

Ken: Now you're big stars.

Fred: Now we're big stars.

Ken: Tell me, what does it feel like to be a big star? How did that change your life?

Fred: It certainly changed Lee's life. In this other world, there was such a thing called room service. [*laughs*] That was a big part of his life. That's it. We were big stars.

Ken: Now you're big stars. You have "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena." You have "Goodnight Irene." How did you go about selecting songs thereafter? Who decided what you were going to sing and what you were going to put on the record? How did that work out?

Fred: Well, as the big A&R guy at Decca, it was Gordon's ultimate job to come up with songs. Everything he did was usually successful. He was going to keep doing successful things for us and for him.

Ken: So he would be basically the person that knew the songs that you were doing. He would select a song and say, "Oh, this is..."

Fred: We also would be coming up with some songs and some ideas. He would come in with things. He was pretty good.

Ken: I was asking you: Emotionally, psychologically, what does it feel like to be on top of the world, musically?

Fred: Well it felt very good. It felt very good in many ways. It allowed me to do some experimenting musically and I think that some of the stuff I came up with was quite remarkable. I will modestly say, pretty wonderful.

Ken: So tell me about the group dynamic. Was it a democracy? Was there a dominant player? How did you make decisions as a group?

Fred: One of the things was quite remarkable about the group was that we were all so respectful of each other. It shows up several times. I can't remember which specifically, but I have to say to other singers or other musicians [that] one of the biggest things you have to be paying attention to is what you're hearing. The whole key to everything is, you have to listen to what the other singers are doing and you have to make your adjustments to them. Whether to sing it louder than them or sing it less than them. You really have to be listening to what the others are doing. And if you can't do that, you are in the wrong line of work. That's such a key to what goes on. Even now I'm not describing it well enough...

Ken: Now, you're on top of the world. You've got these great songs. Did you feel pressure to follow up with the next song? The "What are we going to do next" dilemma?

Fred: Well, it did become a problem, because we were also going in some different directions a little bit. What emerged was a kind of feeling, but it was around what I don't know.... Ronnie got into her feminist thing with a lot of [growls, laughs] what to my mind was crazy. I would write her a new song for example and, automatically, if it was a women's song, I would send it off to Ronnie right away. [But] after a while I wouldn't send stuff to her anymore, because she would take it, and she would rewrite it. It was so bitter, it was so angry, and it was so distorted. [laughs]

I finally had to say, Ronnie, I don't really like the tone of what you've been doing. I'm not going to argue with you about the tone of it and too much of what I hear, so I'm not going to try to talk you out of that at this point. I will tell you one thing, I don't care whatever it is you do, but the one thing you will not do, you will not get me to change my name to Fred 'Hellerperson.'"
[laughter] And I was so proud of myself, [laughs] because I really hit that one on the head.
[laughter] I won't change my name to Fred Hellerperson."

Ken: We were talking about the pressure to come up with the next big hit, the next big thing. You said you were heading off in different directions?

Fred: Yeah, we clearly were.

Ken: Was Gordon [Jenkins] able to say, "Here..."

Fred: No. This is was when Gordon was out of it for us; Decca wasn't recording anything of ours. They wouldn't be able to sell it anywhere [because we were blacklisted]. *[laughs]*

Ken: So let's go back a little bit. We want to talk about Joseph McCarthy.

Fred: That was really like an atomic bomb that hit us. It exploded on us. It was in June, 1950, and we had finished our obligation to the Village Vanguard. And [after a while] we were going our ways. Ronnie was going to California. She had a new baby, and so on and so forth. Aside from that, it was time, we were all going [our own ways]. We had different things we wanted to do, clearly, four separate people.

What happened was that the black list just hit us as a shot, exploding as it formed.

Ken: How did you find out?

Fred: We found out that no place would hire us, not a club, not any place. They didn't want us to do concerts and this and that. Every concert was being picketed and so on. I'd be waking up every morning saying, "Well, what am I going to do today, then?" So I decided, "Damn it. Here I've been making a very nice living as a musician, but I don't know a damn thing about music." That's when I decided I wanted to build myself a little workshop. I built my little workshop.

I had [with me] Bob De Cormier, who was a very good friend of mine, a wonderful musician out of Julliard.⁶ He really wanted to be a conductor for musical things. And then I had two women who were singers -- actually who had worked for Gordon Jenkins in his choruses and stuff.

Those two, Bob De Cormier, and me, I now had four people in a workshop. Come hell or high water, whatever happened for the Wednesday nights we'd get together, I made sure they always had a few new arrangements for things, for a new song, or even when I didn't have a new song.

It was the smartest thing I ever did in my life, to do this workshop for myself. On top of that, I was madly in love with someone. And I was making arrangements, and they were good arrangements, good vocal arrangements. The singers loved what I was doing, because it was fresh, and it was new.

Here I was in love, and never mind that I was broke. [laughs] I wasn't broke then, but I had no future, [laughs] but so what? It was a terrible, terrible time [due to being blacklisted]. Yet, it was the happiest time of my life. I can really say it was the happiest time of my life.

Ken: What a wonderful juxtaposition. Were you called to testify before Congress? Do you recall?

Fred: I wasn't called. I didn't have to go to Washington. But I did had to walk to the Federal Courthouse in New York, and the members of the House Un-American Activities Committee were there. I didn't have anything to say to them. They asked me a lot of stupid questions. "Mr. Hellerman, I see here that you sang for the Communist Party, a meeting of the Communist Party." That's all they had to say.

I said, "Yeah. I sang for them. I sang for the meeting. So what?" [laughs] Nobody blew up the White House. [laughs] It was just a meeting.

Ken: You were cut off from recording.

Fred: Cut off from my recordings, cut off from any jobs. My reputation... who the hell wanted to come close to me?

Ken: So then, in 1952, *The Weavers* broke up?

Fred: There was nothing to do. We couldn't do anything. Ronnie went out to California.

Ken: Tell us about how you were able to resume your career as a *Weaver*. You had other things going on, but then *The Weavers* got back together in 1955 for a reunion concert.

Fred: Yes, and that had to do with Harold Leventhal, the famous concert producer, our manager, and my good friend. [After three years of being unable to compose or perform under their real names, *The Weavers* successfully reunited for a Christmas Eve show at Carnegie Hall, their first live performance in three years. -ed.]

* * *

Ken: Let me change the topic a little bit. Since we are the Weston Historical Society, let's talk a little bit about Weston. What motivated you to come here in the first place?

Fred: What motivated me to come? It was around the Alice Delamar thing. Alice liked to have interesting people surrounding her, and these friends of mine were interesting people.⁷ She said that she was a friend of Will Geer.⁸

My friends, there were a couple, and they were friends of Will Geer, who was a very good friend of mine, also. Will got blacklisted from Hollywood. Then he came to New York and well he couldn't get any work right away in New York. But he got together theatrical people. I can't even remember who the hell they were anymore.

But he called me and he was staying in a loft down on 27th Street. We'd get together on the weekends and he put on shows and he and I would be putting on plays together. Anybody you know would come in, walk in and Woody Guthrie would come by and all kinds of people and if my memory wasn't completely shot and all kinds of other wonderful figures I could tell you coming by.

Really everybody who came by had something to do or sing or tell a joke or whatever. These people who were in this loft in New York also would say to me, "Hey Fred are you got to come up too?" We would come up here to Newtown Turnpike for the weekend. I would come up and all kinds of people would be here. Lotte Lenya for example, would be up here half the time.⁹ Movie stars or writers, it was always interesting.

Do you see that painting on the wall there [pointing]? That was a painting by Jean Watts [a local friend]. She's a wonderful painter, delightful and so full of humor. I would come up here and take a walk down Newtown turnpike, which wasn't paved, by the way, at the time. I was always so touched to see [these people]...my God this is only an hour away from New York.

But from Greenwich Village where I lived it was so different, so different. Of course, I was broke by now. I didn't have any money. The idea of my ever coming up here to live was so remote. But that is how I happen to know to this area and fall in love with it.

I'm trying to think ... I remember *The Weavers* did come up here. It was about this time or maybe earlier probably when we came up and we did a concert at Staples High School in Westport.

Harold Leventhal was already here. He had bought a house right by Cobb's Mill Inn. I stopped at a real estate office up here and said "Look, I am looking for a small house." and that's it. Then when we came for that weekend I got a call from the real estate person and said "I think I have a house for you." and I said "Oh, good because I'm coming up here for next Sunday."

That's how I came up here, looked at this house, and bought it. Right away I moved in and then we had a baby, Susan and I. And we got married by Euclid Shook, an artist friend and justice of the peace here.

Once we were living here we went to a Memorial Day weekend event. You go downtown, and people are marching and so on. And I don't know whether we decided to march in it or not, but it was a parade of people saying "We're marching for peace. And we don't like the war in Vietnam." It was so nice to be marching in a parade and not to be hearing [like we used to hear when demonstrating in New York], "Go, damn it! Go back to Red Russia!"

We felt so comfortable. Yeah we're in the right place. It really put a good mark on this area.

END OF PART I

¹ Peter V. "Pete" Cacchione was a labor leader who was elected to the New York City Council in 1941 and re-elected in 1943 and 1945.

² People's Songs was an organization founded by Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Lee Hays, and others on December 31, 1945, in New York City to "create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people."

³ German dramatist and novelist, 1862-1946. Hauptman wrote "The Weavers" in 1892 and won his Nobel Prize in 1912 "in recognition of his fruitful, varied and outstanding production in the realm of dramatic art."

⁴ In addition to being the leader of his own big band, Jenkins was famous as an arranger, conductor, and composer. He was also already a managing director of Decca Records when he first heard the group.

⁵ "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" was a version of a Hebrew song written in 1941 that had become very popular in what was then British occupied Palestine (now Israel). Released in May, 1950, it was the "A" side of a single that had "Leadbelly" Ledbetter's "Goodnight Irene" on the other. "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" peaked at number two in the Billboard chart in July; "Goodnight Irene" hit number one for the first of 13 consecutive weeks in August; and the record reportedly sold two million copies.

⁶ Robert De Cormier has composed music for chorus as well as ballet and Broadway scores. He has directed concerts and recordings for television specials, and the conductor and leader of The Belafonte Folk Singers from 1957 to 1965. He also headed The Robert De Cormier singers, who performed extensively in the mid-1960s and then on and off until the mid-1990s

⁷ Alice Delamar was the daughter of Joseph Delamar, who made his fortune in the mining industry and was one of the founders of 3M. When she came to Weston she bought every property along the Saugatuck River on Newtown Turnpike from Route 33 to Cobb's Mill. She rented the houses at a low rate to people she wanted around her, in essence creating a sprawling artists' community which thrived for a time. She kept her huge swimming pool open to all her neighbors.

⁸ Born William Aughe Ghery, Will Geer was an actor and social activist best known for his portrayal of Grandpa Zebulon Tyler Walton in the 1970s TV series, *The Waltons*.

⁹ Lotte Lenya was an Austrian singer, diseuse, and actress, long based in the United States. In the German-speaking and classical music world she is best remembered for her performances of the songs of her husband, Kurt Weill.